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Aboriginal Women: The Journey Towards A Doctorate

by

Shauna Lynn Bruno

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The undersigned certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for acceptance, a thesis entitled **Aboriginal Women: The Journey Towards A Doctorate** submitted by Shauna Lynn Bruno in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in First Nations Education.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated in loving memory of my grandmothers who have passed on into the spirit world, but whose teachings and guidance continue to live on:

KOHKOM MARY YELLOWBIRD

AND

KOHKOM KATIE BRUNO

ABSTRACT

This study is based on the lives of four outstanding Aboriginal women who have completed or are close to completing a doctorate. The purpose of this study is to learn about the challenges that high achieving women have to face during their academic endeavor, and discover the facilitative factors that help them in their journey. In order to gather the necessary data, an Indigenous framework was used based on the life experiences of these women shared through stories. In order to organize and interpret the experiences, a qualitative technique of semi-structured interview questions and thematic analysis was used to gather the stories.

The stories revealed that the academic journey towards a doctorate is more than about academics and perseverance in the face of adversity. It is also a journey towards self-discovery built on the foundation of the Aboriginal culture and the influential people within that culture. The stories provide insight into the life journey of women empowered and strengthened by their culture who develop a dedication and determination to improve the lives of Aboriginal people.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Background

When I first decided to apply into the First Nations Graduate Program, there was no doubt in my mind that I would write about Aboriginal women. I knew I would focus on the strengths, charisma, and resilient nature of women. My research question may have been far from clear at this point but my topic on Aboriginal women was crystal clear. I was always interested in learning about the lives of other women, especially the lives of Aboriginal women, and understanding their condition in life, as well as my own. At a very young age, although not fully understanding the concept, I recognized inequality between the genders, unjust social structures, discrimination, and other issues pertaining to Aboriginal women.

Two brief personal experiences are noted here that may provide insight into the origin of my thinking. The majority of my elementary and secondary schooling was completed in a small rural town. However, I attended a Christian boarding school in Saskatchewan for my grade eleven year. I made most of the arrangements myself to attend this school. My parents were not too fond of the idea though impressed with my determination. For some unforeseen reason, I was determined to set out and create a path for myself, pursuing my education away from home, beyond the radius of 20 kilometers. At that young age, Saskatchewan was far enough for me, being an approximate six-hour drive from home. There were few of us Aboriginal girls who attended this school. I soon realized I did not see myself, an Aboriginal girl, reflected in the books or in the classroom discussions.

When I set out for my undergraduate degree in Calgary I found the same dilemma. I completed my BA degree with a major in Women Studies. Not only did I question the limited number of Aboriginal students in the program but also where I was in the midst of all the literature, discussions, or material. It seemed like everything had primarily a eurocentric focus. I found few books written by and for Aboriginal people who have truly engaged and lived the Aboriginal experience.

I do not negate or dishonor my learning and those who helped me through these experiences. However, I have come to recognize that our identity is formulated not only

by knowing who we are but also by knowing about the culture, people, and belief system that surround us. Throughout my studies and from listening to personal life stories I have recognized that many Aboriginal women have suffered immensely from the hands of colonizers and victimizers, and have consequently affected succeeding generations. This has since led to many challenges for Aboriginal women, especially in the area of education. I have come to believe that what has helped empower many of these women is learning from the lives of other Aboriginal women. My objective is to acknowledge those Aboriginal women who have academically achieved and at the same time help us understand the struggles, barriers, and resistances experienced by Aboriginal women. I have pondered ideas about what I can do to contribute towards education in the hope of helping in the process of improving lives. I hope the result of this thesis may help in one small way and inspire others as it has inspired me and contribute towards improving and strengthening the circle of life.

Identification of the Research Question

Five hundred years have passed since the first European contact with Aboriginal people in North America (Battiste, 1998; Fife, 1993). Even in Western Canada, where sustained contact was more recent, two hundred and fifty years have passed. Many Aboriginal women have suffered immensely from the process of Euro-Canadian colonization of Indigenous people and this process has resulted in the suffering of generations thereafter (Battiste, 1998; Maracle, 1996; Miller & Chuckryk, 1996). Throughout my undergraduate studies and from listening to personal life stories I have come to recognize that colonization itself has led to many challenges for Aboriginal women, especially with regard to high academic achievement. Colonization has silenced Aboriginal women because of their race and gender (Miller & Chuchryk, 1996). I know this through my own personal experience as an Aboriginal woman and through personal stories shared with me. Although the oppression of Aboriginal women by the dominant society (Acoose, 1995; Maracle, 1996; Monture-Angus, 1995) has been a struggle, and is an ongoing concern, many Aboriginal women have persevered. As my literature review will demonstrate, very few studies have examined Aboriginal women's progress through higher education. There appears to be more evidence of academic barriers in the literature

than on personal experiences of academic success. The lack of adequate information on high academic achievement by Aboriginal women severely limits our understanding of their progress. It is this gap in the research on Aboriginal women which my study is intended to address. My admiration of outstanding women has led me on this journey to explore the facilitative factors that contribute to their academic success in spite of their experience of oppression or colonization.

I believe Aboriginal women need to articulate their knowledge and worldview, in their own words. The purpose of this research is to discover the challenges that high academic achieving women had to face and how they overcame these challenges. In doing this research, I will draw upon the power, perseverance, and determination of those Aboriginal women who have achieved and earned the highest university degree or are close to completing it. My focus is on Aboriginal women who have experienced the journey towards a doctorate. More specifically, my research question asks: What are the life experiences that influence the journey of Aboriginal women who have achieved academic success?

Definition of Terms

The following terms are used in this study:

1. Aboriginal is my preferred term for the purpose of this study. It refers to Native, Indian, First Nations, and Indigenous people of North America. Various authors in my literature review use these words interchangeably.
2. Success will be more clearly defined by the Aboriginal women selected for my study. I refer to success as the accomplishments of an individual who has achieved her desired set of goals. These are goals that are recognized and valued in the community – the individual's Aboriginal community and the larger community as well. I also refer to success as one's ability to maintain the balance of life in a spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional sense.
3. Challenges is used in this study to refer to the barriers and struggles that hinder Aboriginal women in their journey.

Sub-Questions

Several sub-questions emanating from my research question will be addressed in this study. Answering these questions will help clarify my research question:

1. In what ways do the personal history and family/community relationships influence the achievement of Aboriginal women?
2. In what ways are the academic achievements of Aboriginal women influenced by personal qualities?
3. What are the challenges that hinder Aboriginal women from academic achievement?
4. How is success defined by the Aboriginal women?

Personal Assumptions

In developing this study, I was influenced by five personal assumptions about the life experiences of Aboriginal women and their views on success. These assumptions are based on my own personal experience and the personal stories shared with me. First, I assume that the older generation of Aboriginal women will define success according to the Aboriginal worldview and this will differ from the definition of the younger generation. This is not to say that Aboriginal women would not have had to embrace some eurocentric beliefs and values, while earning a doctorate. The younger generation has been influenced much more by eurocentric beliefs and values, and the absorption of aspects of European culture brought into the Aboriginal culture. Second, I believe there is a different measure of success for Aboriginal women compared with non-Aboriginal women. Aboriginal women who have suffered the effects of colonization have consequently experienced fewer opportunities and struggle with self-identity that may contribute to their self-concept.

Third, I believe that personal qualities will be a major facilitation factor in the lives of Aboriginal women. I believe that strength is derived internally. Fourth, I believe one of the factors that influence the success of Aboriginal women is mentoring. It is likely that for Aboriginal women, the more effective mentors will also be Aboriginal women. My final belief centers on having a family support system. A strong family support system contributes to the stable foundation necessary for pursuing achievement.

CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

To contextualize the objective of my study, I will first provide a brief overview of past studies on highly achieving women, mainly for the purposes of identifying the challenges that successful women in general have had to face, including an assessment of these challenges in terms of the experience of Aboriginal women. Then I will turn to a literature review of the experiences of Aboriginal women. This review will include the changing role of Aboriginal women and their response to colonization, as well as facilitative factors and barriers to their attainment of educational success. Finally, I will discuss what Aboriginal women are doing to help other Aboriginal women.

Highly Achieving Women

There is an extensive body of literature on genius, eminence, giftedness, and on talented individuals. However, the focus has been predominantly on males (see Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1999; Yewchuk & Aysto, 1999). Yewchuk and Aysto (1999) comment on this situation: "[The under-representation of] women among the ranks of the eminent is consistent with the misogynist view, prevalent a century ago, that it is 'unnatural' for women to achieve greatness" (p. 30). According to Lombroso (1910, p. 138), "there are no women of genius; the women of genius are men" (cited in Yewchuk & Aysto, 1999, p. 30). The way children were socialized into traditional roles as children could have a direct effect on the future achievement of girls, according to Gunnarsson (1997). She states that the way boys and girls have been taught to interact or learn in school and at home may persist into secondary and post-secondary education. For Aboriginal students, "differing expectations of female and male students emerged in the earliest stages of the development of post-Confederation residential schools" (Miller, 1996, p. 218). Studies of highly achieving women have showed that success has been difficult because women have had to tackle gendered power differentials consistently throughout their lifetime.

Past studies have shown that "societal constraints" on women may jeopardize opportunities for further achievement in obtaining an "education, financial independence,

power, and social and legal equality" (see Yewchuk & Aysto, 1999, p. 30). Women do not lack in the area of skill or ability but rather women are not recognized for their skill and ability (Silverman, 1986, cited in Yewchuk & Aysto, 1999). For Gunnarsson (1997), "the confusion of power and masculinity can indeed also be assumed to lead to a marginalizing of women and to a higher evaluation of men's than of women's contributions" (p. 222). Although more women have emerged into the public sphere in recent years there is still insufficient literature on successful women; furthermore, this emergence is not yet universal (Noble, Subotnik, & Arnold, 1999).

According to Noble, Subotnik, and Arnold (1999), demographic factors can constrain minority women from being classified as talented. They state, "the centers of power and achievement have been largely defined by middle class, male, white, urban, heterosexual, and Western traditions, values, practices, and assumptions. For non-white, non-privileged women, therefore, multicultural issues are more complex than for middle class white women" (p. 143). Not only do race, gender, and class create a fundamental difference but also location and lived experiences must be considered. This fundamental difference from mainstream experience has been evident in the lives of Aboriginal women. The following section will be devoted to the experiences of Aboriginal women and the challenges they have had to overcome in order to achieve academic success.

The Changing Role of Aboriginal Women

Colonization

Colonization has had a devastating impact on the lives of Aboriginal people (Maracle, 1996). The relentless pressure of European immigration brought with it a new era for Aboriginal people, one that is still painfully experienced and horrifically remembered. As Hare and Barman (2000) remind us, the process of assimilation began when "the government of Canada fostered a historical belief that Aboriginal people were not only inferior to their non-Aboriginal counterparts, but posed a problem to formulating the Canadian nation.... For Aboriginal people to be assimilated into Canadian society, their cultures, languages, and traditions had to be eradicated" (p. 332). In the Canadian context, it is an experience known only by Aboriginal people and will never be truly understood by the dominant white society. They can only read and learn about it, but to

actually live it is a different experience (see Meili, 1991; Silman, 1987). Residential schools were established to 'civilize' Aboriginal children as part of the assimilation process. This meant taking children away from their families and communities and breaking down the family unit and cultural ties.

As a result of colonization, Aboriginal women have been the objects of racism, classism, and sexism (Acoose, 1995; Maracle, 1996; Miller & Chuchryk, 1996). These oppressions have caused generations to suffer and hurt, and have influenced the children and grandchildren of Aboriginal women. The colonizers were deliberate in their acts to oppress; these were acts of ignorance, violence and cruelty.

Colonization has also affected many Aboriginal men (Billson, 1995). According to Collier (1998), the missionaries taught Aboriginal men to treat women as lesser beings. It is damaging enough when Aboriginal people are left to feel like outcasts, but it is even more damaging and immoral when Aboriginal women are made to feel worthless. Maracle (1996) states that the "dictates of racism are that Native men are beneath white women and Native females are not fit to be referred to as women" (p. 18). The contribution of women continues to go unrecognized, and it is disturbing that Aboriginal women are viewed as the lesser beings by the colonizers and, worst of all, by Aboriginal men. As Maracle (1996) blatantly states, "the really big crime is that our men-folk rise when a white woman walks into the room. Native men go to great lengths to recognize her, and of course, where there is controversy, her word is very often the respected one" (p. 22).

Although many Aboriginal people have survived the great oppression[1], the pain still lingers in many lives and is passed down from generation to generation. Battiste (1998) writes that, "Aboriginal communities continue to suffer the effects of colonization and imperialistic policies that erode the base of Indigenous knowledge necessary for the healing and development of Aboriginal peoples" (p. 16).

Traditional Role

In working with the notion of 'traditional,' I will refer to Kim Anderson (2000), a Cree/Metis educator who suggests that "when we look for Indigenous 'traditions,' we must be aware that everything we are looking at was constructed to fit a certain reality of

[1] European contact and the experiences of Residential Schools.

the people who were living it at the time" (p. 35). As I discuss the traditional role of Aboriginal women, I am making reference to "values, philosophies and lifestyles that pre-date the arrival of the Europeans"(p. 35).

Some would argue that the most detrimental effect of colonization has been the changing role of Aboriginal women (see Miller & Chuchryk, 1996). These women once had very prominent roles in their clans and were considered to be the main decision-makers. Women were respected and their contributions were recognized. The roles of Aboriginal women and men were clearly defined, as stated by Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra (1989):

> ...the woman was defined as nourisher, and the man, protector, and as protector, he had the role of helper...She was responsible for the establishment of all of the norms – whether they were political, economic, social, or spiritual. She lived in a very co-operative environment, where power needed not be lorded over. (p. 12)

Aboriginal women were regarded as powerful and sacred beings:

> There was an understanding that the woman in many respects, certainly *spiritually*, was more powerful and complete and this because she had a direct relationship to Mother Earth, Grandmother Moon, and to the female elements of the waters, all of which we cannot live without...[women] had been given the responsibility for completing creation, something that she still carries, even now. (Osennontion & Skonaganleh:ra, 1989, p. 12)

The Mother Earth creates life just as women create life. Emphasis is placed on the power and sacredness of Mother Earth and the need for her to be maintained and protected.

There is a fear amongst Aboriginal people that this relationship and respect for Mother Earth is being lost. Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra (1989) stress the need to maintain this relationship to the natural world "because the Mother is getting sicker, the world is getting smaller, there are more and more people who are less and less careful" (p. 11). A parallel concern is that the relationship and respect for Aboriginal women is also being lost. This means the loss of cultural traditions, values, and beliefs. These characteristics that are innate within women are no longer respected and regarded in the same way as they were before colonization.

Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra (1989) believe that, in order to regain our power as Aboriginal women, "we must remind ourselves and the Grandfathers, Fathers, Uncles,

Brothers, Husbands, and Sons amongst us, that they borrowed and adopted 'other' ways and that those other ways of looking at us are just not acceptable" (p. 8).

The notion of looking to our traditions for guidance is considered by LaRocque (1996) to be a challenge for Aboriginal women. She articulates this challenge as follows:

> ...as women we must be circumspect in our recall of tradition. We must ask ourselves whether and to what extent tradition is liberating to us as women. We must ask ourselves wherein lies (lie) our source(s) of empowerment. We know enough about human history that we cannot assume that all Aboriginal traditions universally respected and honoured women. (And is "respect" and "honour" all that we ask for?) It should not be assumed, even in those original societies that were structured along matriarchal lines, that matriarchies necessarily prevented men from oppressing women. (p. 14)

LaRocque (1996) and Anderson (2000) both contend that Aboriginal women must question how tradition is framed and in what context it is being used, in order to construct a positive life style. As Anderson states, "like our ancestors, we must work with those things that suit our present reality" (p. 36). And as Gael High Pine states, "it is not important to preserve our traditions, it is important to allow our traditions to preserve us" (cited in Hampton, 1995, p. 22).

Warrior Women

Centuries ago some women sought out esteemed positions that were male dominated positions. Medicine (1983) described these women as "warrior women," who assumed masculine roles but maintained their traditional role and responsibilities as a woman (pp. 267 & 269). "Warrior women" gained power and honor through their involvement in male affairs. This type of involvement was not considered to be socially deviant, but rather socially acceptable (Medicine, 1983). The term itself does not mean they were 'warriors' who would physically fight an enemy. It allowed a woman to be independent from her spouse and carry a status and role that did not confine her only to domestic duties. In my opinion, this concept of "warrior women" can be applied to those women who are now taking on what are considered to be male dominated positions in the workforce-- directors, coordinators, business executives, etc.

It should be noted in passing that "warrior women" are not recognized by all scholars. Consider, for example, the Lakota culture as described by DeMallie (1983),

who doubts the existence of the role of warrior women. But since Medicine (1983) is herself Lakota while DeMallie is not, one would tend to agree with Medicine.

DeMallie contends that there was no deviation from the "sexual division of labor" between the Lakota men and women (p. 239), and that the clear line between men and women had to be adhered to or consequences were paid. "Men were expected to be aggressive, women to be passive" (Deloria cited in DeMallie, 1983, p. 239), and women were excluded from many male affairs. DeMallie (1983) states, "there was no developed tradition of warrior women among the Lakotas" (p. 242). However, DeMallie does acknowledge that the role of women was recognized and appreciated. In the Lakota culture, women were considered as "the safeguards of society" (p. 261).

In many Native cultures women may have had a passive role centuries ago, but recognition and appreciation of the role of women were shown in other ways. Women were respected and honored. As stated earlier, this has diminished. Stereotypical images of "squaws" came to prevail and this misrepresented image generated racism and sexism (Acoose, 1995; Valaskakis, 1999). The loss of status and respect for Aboriginal women is reflected in the ongoing changing role of women and the changes continue to be challenging.

Modern Role

The changing role from traditional to modern roles amongst Aboriginal women has created challenges that may be both liberating and disorienting. These changes may be liberating because women now have the freedom of choosing a more independent lifestyle compared to their traditional ancestors. The changes may be disorienting for women because women must continue to strive to maintain and preserve the culture in a modern world.

For example, the Iroquois woman may maintain their role as "keeper of the culture, the faith, and the home. But the outside world has changed around her, as has life on the reserve" (Billson, 1995, p. 23). Women are still encouraged to marry and have children. As the keepers of the home, women have a responsibility to maintain the home, raise the children, and when necessary, to work outside the home to earn extra income. The men, on the other hand, have the responsibility of family "breadwinners." Elders are concerned about who will teach the traditions to the children when the mother has gone

outside the home to work. The "children who are raised by television, public schools, and movies slip away from traditional authority" (Billson, 1995, p. 27), with possible detrimental effects on the maintenance of the Aboriginal culture.

It is also important to add that "for younger women in their twenties and thirties, the pressure (as in other cultures) is toward egalitarianism. Many women are striving for equality in their domestic relationships with men – which, for Iroquois women, ironically means 'giving' men more power," considering that, traditionally, Iroquois women had more power than their male counterparts (Billson, 1995, p. 33). Thus, breaking such traditional patterns causes confusion among contemporary women.

Indian Act (1876)

"The Indian Act changed us from a matriarchal to a patriarchal society," states an Iroquois woman (Billson, 1995, p. 35). Through this Act, the federal government established full legislative authority over Aboriginal people and left a legacy that has marked Aboriginal women ever since (Billson, 1995; Burt, 1993; Silman, 1987). It was the Indian Act that established a "patrilineal principle of descent" to determine who was status and who was not, so that "legal status was transmitted exclusively in the male line" (Burt, 1993, p. 95). When an Aboriginal woman married a non-Aboriginal man she would forfeit her status and lose all her rights. Or, if she married a man from another nation, she would have to change her status to his nation (Billson, 1995). The Indian Act discriminated against Aboriginal women because when an Aboriginal man married a non-Aboriginal or non-status woman, he retained his status, as well as giving status to his wife and children. This plagued the lives and identity of many Aboriginal women.

During the 1960s and 1970s those Aboriginal women who divorced and returned to their reserves found only resentment and abandonment (Silman, 1987). Burt (1993) states that community members were not "sympathetic to the plight of their disenfranchised sisters" (p. 98). In 1985, the Canadian Parliament passed Bill C-31, legislation to amend the Indian Act which discriminated against Aboriginal women. Many of these women became referred to as Bill C-31 women. Although gaining reinstatement of their birthright "was a major milestone for Native women in Canada," it also initiated new controversies with community members in their home communities (Silman, 1987, p. 13; Billson, 1995). Community members became divided on whether to

allow women who lost their status back into the community or not. Some individuals sympathized with the women and felt that it was only fair to welcome them back to the community. Others felt that these women knew the consequences when they married and therefore opposed their re-entry (Billson, 1995). In addition, there was a fear that if all reinstated women moved back to their communities there would be a shortage of housing and employment (Silman, 1987).

Billson (1995) states that, "at the heart of this debate are fears about the very survival of Indian culture and traditions" (p. 38). One main reason is because the "recognition of one's 'Indianness' is politically, culturally, and economically important" (Brayboy, 2000, p. 422). This illustrates the continued struggle of contemporary Aboriginal women, as stated earlier. Although many Aboriginal women are adopting mainstream culture and have the freedom to choose their future partners, it seems that the responsibility of maintaining their culture lies with them and not with the men.

Education

With the establishment of residential schools in Canada, the federal government attempted to impose a eurocentric education system on Aboriginal people. As part of this genocidal attempt, the traditional Aboriginal educational system was consigned to extinction (see Barman et al., 1986; Collier, 1998; Miller, 1996). My own speculation is perhaps this is one of the reasons there is limited academic literature on or about Aboriginal people by Aboriginal people who have truly lived the Aboriginal experience. As the literature demonstrates, very few studies have examined Aboriginal women's progress through higher education.

For many students, entering university is a culture shock. Aboriginal students have had to modify their lifestyle moving away from their traditional education[2] to adhere to university standards and theories in order to obtain a formal education. As Fox (1996) states, "University is based on a powerful, but extremely narrow conception of thinking and communicating compared to traditional ways of thinking and communicating" (cited in Marin, 2001, p. 28). Although the number of students in

[2] An Aboriginal Worldview that encompasses, but limited to, culture, teachings from parents and Elders, holistic thinking, natural laws.

university is increasing, the academic literature that is available "does not define the experience of First Nations university education well from either the perspectives of the student or that of the institution. We do not have a well developed descriptive literature, and our analytic traditions in this field are even less able to explain the social dynamics of the First Nations experience" (Archibald, Bowman, Pepper, Urion, 1995, p. 161).

Facilitating Educational Success

Despite the challenges that many Aboriginal women had to face, many have persevered through their challenges and continued to achieve at high academic levels. There appears to be more evidence of academic barriers in the literature than personal experience of academic success. This lack of adequate information on high academic achievement by or on Aboriginal women severely limits our knowledge of their progress. It is this gap in the research on Aboriginal women which my study is intended to address.

According to a study by Macias (1989), conducted with eleven American Indian women enrolled in a graduate program, "there are distinctive Indian cognitive strengths that facilitate graduate school success" (p. 43). It was not only their own perseverance that added to their success but their ability to adapt particular Indigenous learning strategies from their culture to their academic experience. Two examples of these facilitative strategies are: (1) the ability to critically evaluate and analyze a particular concept while maintaining a subjective, accepting perspective, and (2) the ability to synthesize extensive and diverse information, which is believed to be a cultural characteristic (p. 48).

Macias' (1989) study suggests that educators need to teach in a way that is understood, valued, and relevant to the learning experience of Aboriginal students. It is "essential that educators develop and encourage the synthesis abilities of Indian students. It may well be that Indians who do succeed academically do so because they have relied heavily upon a cultural predisposition to integrate and relate what they learn" (p. 49). This is done holistically. It is related to a disposition to think in wholes rather than parts. By contrast, I think western culture emphasizes analytic abilities, such as taking things apart. Academic success is rooted in the Aboriginal culture, "in the spiritual values and traditions that make us who we are" (Hampton, 1995, p. 21). The teachings stem from our elders who are the most notable teachers.

Teachings from our Elders

In order to understand the Aboriginal worldview, knowledge, and language, we need "to learn from the ecosystem as our ancestors did, as well as to learn from our elders' experiences" (Henderson, Symposium, 2000). Aboriginal traditions were taught orally and it was through stories told by the Elders that the people learned about life laws (Monture-Angus, 1995).

Sterling (1992) discusses Native education pedagogy and the importance of acknowledging that culturally different teachers and teaching styles affect how a student will learn. She states that "long-term acquisition of skills and knowledge" passed down from generation to generation depends on who the teacher is and the style of teaching that is used (p. 169). The teachings of grandmothers and what they pass down to their children and grandchildren are important in maintaining our culture and tradition (Maracle, 1996; Sterling, 1992). It is important to acknowledge that these teachings were part of educating children prior to European contact. A formal education system did exist prior to contact. However, it certainly did not resemble the western or mainstream educational system that was forced on Aboriginal people. This education system that existed pre-contact was not "given" or introduced to Aboriginal people (Collier, 1998); it was always part of their existence.

The words of our grandmothers are inspiring to Aboriginal women. Listening to the stories and the use of words very carefully creates a very powerful learning experience. In a dialogue between Ellen White and Jo-ann Archibald, White emphasizes the importance of storytelling by Elders and cites the Elders in her dialogue: "Stories are teacher. Stories telling you something. You learn when you get old; you'll be happy that you have listened because some day you gonna use those" (Archibald & White, 1992, p. 153).

In contrast to Elders' knowledge is eurocentric knowledge. Battiste (1998) addresses a very crucial area that is not recognized by the present mainstream education system, namely, cognitive imperialism in the education of Aboriginal students. The knowledge that is being taught to Aboriginal students is "fragmented knowledge" stemming from eurocentric perspectives (p. 21). In some sense this is a continuation of the assimilation and oppression imposed on Aboriginal people. Eurocentric beliefs cannot

become the exclusive foundation of knowledge from which Aboriginal students are taught. This is not to discredit eurocentric knowledge; rather, one must recognize its limitations, Battiste (1998) states, "Eurocentric scholars may be useful in helping Indigenous people articulate their concerns, but to speak for them is to deny them the self-determination so essential to human progress" (p. 25). In order for Aboriginal students to feel a sense of power and liberation they must learn about their people, their knowledge, their culture, and their language. These are addressed only minimally or not at all in the schools (Battiste, 1998; Battiste & Barman, 1995). This is why it is so important to maintain and preserve the knowledge, wisdom, and teachings of our Elders.

Barriers to Educational Success

According to 1986 Statistics Canada data cited by Collier (1998), there are more Aboriginal women attending institutions of post-secondary education in Canada than Aboriginal men. There are few Aboriginal post-secondary educational institutions in existence, and only a small number in Canada; thus, most Aboriginal students attend mainstream post-secondary educational institutions. According to Collier (1989) this may result in:

> low enrolment; low success rates, i.e., high failure/drop-out rates; unsuitability of programs and course material; pressure to assimilate and consequent student unease with "losing their culture"; and being away from home. (p. 51)

Many Aboriginal women either have to commute to a post-secondary institution from their reserves or they must relocate. Some may already reside in the area. Marker (2000) believes that those local Aboriginal students who attend mainstream post-secondary school may struggle with their own concept of history with this in mind:

> [These students have] a unique sense of the history of the institution and the community. The often unseen – or hidden – aspects to the history of Indian – white relations can present the most obstinate and puzzling barrier to both the Native student and the administrator striving for change. (p. 404)

Marker (2000) points out that in order to understand the struggle that Aboriginal students experience in post-secondary institutions, it is important to focus attention on "the way that power and culture are animated" in institutions (p. 402). It is important to acknowledge the difference between reserve life and city life. These very different

settings produce "cultural differences" (p. 402). Marker emphasizes the idea of "power and place" by stating, "If we could view the local university from the perspective of tribal people, the camouflaged institution would become conspicuous in its hegemonic role on the cross-cultural landscape" (p. 402).

Within the educational institution, women in general are not treated fairly and are provided fewer and unequal opportunities (Stalker & Prentice, 1998). Furthermore, Aboriginal women as students or staff are underrepresented compared to non-Aboriginal women. This becomes a barrier for Aboriginal women in education. The treatment of Aboriginal women becomes problematic and excludes them from the dominant society. As Collier (1998) states:

> The problem lies…in the refusal of the dominant society to accept the native people as equals. Instead, Canadian policy has decreed that those who did not perish should become like the non-natives. They should assimilate to the Canadian norm…Yet that very norm has excluded, and still does exclude, "the aboriginal from the definition of "Canadian"…This exclusionist ideology naturally carries over into the educational system. (p. 49)

Collier (1998) addresses four basic issues that need to be addressed in order to support Aboriginal women in obtaining their education. The first of these issues is providing adequate childcare. These responsibilities tend to be unrecognized in post-secondary institutions. The second issue addresses the financial responsibility of women who have families to care for while attending school. Although some Aboriginal students are funded through the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development, such funding does not include subsidizing those students who need to take extra courses in order to develop their English language, as a result of their cultural language being their spoken tongue. Acknowledging that language may become a barrier in education is the third issue. The fourth lies in addressing, accommodating, sensitizing, and understanding the Aboriginal culture. Collier (1998) gives a perfect example:

> Imagine, if you can, a seventeen-year old girl from a community of 350 inhabitants arriving in a city of two and a half million people…she has never seen buses before, and does not recognize a bus stop; she has never seen escalators or elevators except in films; the unpaved roads of her community probably have no stop signs, let alone traffic lights. In her community, she knew everyone and was related to many of them. Add to all this the fact that she is living and attending school in a foreign language and culture and you begin to have some idea of the

> incredible adjustment demanded from these people. All suffer from homesickness, and their close communal ties mean that most feel they must go home for…the funeral of a next-door neighbour. (p. 54)

This illustration may not apply to all Aboriginal students; however, that does not negate the fact that most feel they have entered a foreign land when they go away to study. Ironically, what now seems to be foreign land was once in the sole possession of Aboriginal people.

Collier (1998) emphasizes the importance of implementing Aboriginal student support programs in post-secondary institutions. These institutions must be encouraged to provide more Aboriginal counsellors who can work as liaison between students and teachers or professors.

Aboriginal Women Helping Other Aboriginal Women

An increasing number of Aboriginal organizations founded and run by women are evolving and addressing the issues that have plagued the lives of many Aboriginal women. As Maracle (1996) states, removing the "chains which were welded to me by a history neither I nor my ancestors created" is not an easy process and it comes with pain and hurt (preface). One such organization is the Institute for the Advancement of Aboriginal Women (IAAW). This organization helps and addresses the needs of Aboriginal women. This organization also honors Aboriginal women with the Esquao[3] Awards for outstanding achievement in a variety of disciplines such as community involvement, mentor/lifetime achievement, education and culture.

Empowerment of women stems not only from organizations but also from Aboriginal women speaking out independently. Billson (1995) quotes Monture-Okanee, "[native women] must be provided room to speak and the power to define. We are capable speakers and do not need someone else to speak for us" (p. 51). However, her words "must be provided room" implies that someone else is generous enough to allow women to speak. For some authors, that "someone else" refers to the women's movement. For example, Maracle (1996) emphasizes that the women's movement does not include Aboriginal women as 'just' women but women who have only one thing to

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[3] See Esquao publication (December 1999), "From the colonists' inability to pronounce the word Esquao, "squaw" came to be a derogatory term. IAAW is claiming back the term for all Aboriginal women to stand proud when we hear Esquao applied to us!"

contribute to the movement, and that is 'Native' issues. Although it is important to discuss such issues so that others may learn, it should not be the main and only reason for the women's movement to involve Aboriginal women. As Maracle (1996) points out:

> White women invite us to speak if the issue is racism or Native people. We are there to teach, to sensitize them or to serve them in some way. We are expected to retain our position well below them, as their servants. We are not, as a matter of course, invited as an integral part of "their movement." (p.18)

According to Osennontion and Skonaganleh:ra (1989), the women's movement separates gender from identity. She states:

> I never and still do not see myself as strictly woman. That is because I am a KANIEN'KEHA:KA[4] woman. In my experiences, many of our women have been expected to make the separation. We are expected to believe that because we are women, we can automatically share in the sisterhood with other women. (p.14)

On the other hand, it is equally important to acknowledge the mission of what many women's groups have set out to do. The women's movement has been an active force for social change, women's right to equality, equal pay for equal work, equal treatment, and freedom from discrimination and violence (Wine & Ristock, 1991). According to Briskin (1991), the concept of sisterhood originated from early feminist ideology. And as the women's movement grew so did their ideologies. She states, "through struggle, socialist feminists, in particular, have come to recognize the importance of building sisterhood on the basis of difference – in class, race, ethnicity and sexual orientation" (p. 27). This process of identifying with a particular group is referred to as "identity politics" (Briskin, 1991; Grande, 2000). The ideal of empowerment is exquisitely stated by Monture-Angus (1995) who emphasizes, "it is *only* through my culture that my woman's identity is shaped" (p. 29). Aboriginal women need to articulate their knowledge and worldview, in their own words through the Aboriginal culture!

Conclusion

In this literature review, I have emphasized historical and contextual factors which influence Aboriginal women. The life journey of Aboriginal women is constantly shadowed by a cloud of oppression that is the calamitous result of the colonization of Aboriginal people. The traditional role of Aboriginal women has been changed, altered in

[4] In translation, this means Mohawk.

part by the discriminatory provision of the Indian Act (1876). Because women have traditionally played a crucial role in cultural transmission within the family, the changing role has resulted in the loss of traditions, values, and beliefs, those very factors which appear facilitative of successful educational experiences of Aboriginal women. In order to fully understand the life experiences of academically successful Aboriginal women, it is important to listen to their voice and the support provided by other Aboriginal women.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

My Search for an Appropriate Methodology

It was important for me to seek out Indigenous research methodologies for the purposes of my study. As I embarked on my journey in researching Indigenous methodologies, I was mystified by the thought process and contexts of various authors and by graduate students who presented their views about an Indigenous perspective, worldview and research methodology. I struggled with this, in spite of the expectation that, as an Aboriginal person, I would understand the Aboriginal thought process and the ideas and concepts embedded in it. But this understanding has not come easily to me. It has involved much reflection on personal experiences and knowledge of my journey compared to the authors, elders, and peers that I read about and spoke with. The Aboriginal structure of thought and belief system enters into a deep domain and realm. I believe that in order to understand it, one must journey through and practice it. In my journey, I encountered some familiar territory because of my experience and this was the exciting part of my journey. Most of my experience has been in the academic arena taught from western perspectives. My elders and parents have been my greatest Aboriginal teachers with regards to culture. However, they have not taught me all that they know. I am taught at a pace according to what they believe I am ready to learn at whatever stage I am. For much of this chapter I will be making reference to the term *Indigenous* rather than *Aboriginal* because it is more commonly used when referring to methodologies.

Smith (1999) seems to offer reasons for my perplexity regarding exactly what 'Indigenous methodology' entails. She writes, "it is surely difficult to discuss *research methodology* and *indigenous peoples* together, in the same breath, without having an analysis of imperialism, without understanding the complex ways in which the pursuit of knowledge is deeply embedded in the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices" (p. 2). Smith tackles this quite impressively throughout her book. Her definition of Indigenous methodologies includes the following: "A research methodology is a theory and analysis of how research does or should proceed.... Within an indigenous

framework, methodological debates are ones concerned with the broader politics and strategic goals of indigenous research" (p. 143).

Indigenous methodologies are part of creating a context that appeals to Aboriginal researchers and Aboriginal participants involved in research that is respectful and honors Aboriginal practices. There is a conscious attention to healing, spirituality, self-determination, decolonization, and other matters of pressing concern to Aboriginal communities.

Smith (1999) believes that many Aboriginal communities want their members to achieve a western education, but not at the expense of "destroying people's indigenous identities, their languages, values and practices" (p. 134). Doing research as an Aboriginal researcher, especially researching a home community, is not an easy task and it becomes critical to abide by cultural protocol and to understand the significance behind that protocol. I consider myself to be far from completing and fully understanding this topic because I have yet to experience and complete the circle of my journey.

My main concern in this section is about how we can bring together Aboriginal contexts and western principles of doing research in a way that is respectful to both. In practice, this requires a careful examination of research methods and how they are applied by Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal researchers. If we look at the history of Aboriginal people and researchers, most experiences were negative in the sense of the impact, how it was written up, and the validity of the research. As we enter into the twenty-first century, where we are slowly witnessing an increase of Aboriginal students in post-secondary studies, we must seriously examine our methods and practices and ensure that we are honoring our people as we should.

Background on Research and Aboriginal Peoples

Smith (1999) explicitly introduces her book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* by claiming that "the word itself, 'research,' is probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world's vocabulary" (p. 1). The low status of research for Aboriginal people is mainly because research is rooted in the colonization process. However, this is not to say that Aboriginal people did no research before European contact. They did research but in a different context and style in order to maintain knowledge and move forward with new information. Smith (1999) argues that

the process of western research has not been forgotten and is seen as a practice that many people are still weary about. She writes,

> This collective memory of imperialism has been perpetuated through the ways in which knowledge about indigenous peoples was collected, classified and then represented in various ways back to the West, and then, through the eyes of the West, back to those who have been colonized. (pp. 1-2)

Alfred (1999) views the colonial process as a form of higher power that, in spite of everything, continues to control Aboriginal people. Colonization takes on an elusive form that is still a corrosive presence in our lives. He writes,

> Under colonization, hundreds of indigenous nations that were previously autonomous and self-governing suffered a loss of freedom. Even today, the lives of their people are controlled by others. The problems faced by social workers, political scientists, physicians, and teachers can all be traced to this power relationship, to the control of Native lives by a foreign power. (pp. 46-47)

The term 'foreign power' refers to a westernized education, tradition and practice that has dominated Aboriginal tradition and practice. Even in the various academic fields at university, there is a subtle, almost unseen power of domination that is practised throughout.

Aboriginal peoples are considered the most studied and researched group in history and in the world. Most research has attempted to build an understanding of the ways of Aboriginal people - good intentions may have been there - but the result has been demoralization and dehumanization in the community. Much of the difficulty experienced today by Aboriginal researchers conducting research in Aboriginal communities is a result of history.

There are positive developments in the discipline of research. A movement towards conducting research to better sustain and maintain Aboriginal people is on the rise and is creating global awareness. The contribution of research by Aboriginal people is highly regarded in the community. Nevertheless, there is community concern about ensuring the maintenance of fundamental Aboriginal values and belief systems in the conduct of the research. In an Aboriginal context, the fundamental values, beliefs, and rules are rooted in the community and these are reflected onward to community members.

Characteristics of Indigenous Methodologies

The unique and complex distinguishing characteristics of Indigenous methodologies have provided guidance to Aboriginal people throughout their research practice, within the context of a belief in a spiritual world. This is different from the physical and social world assumed by the western researcher. The five characteristics are: *purpose, values and belief systems, processes, Indigenous data sources,* and *community*. I derived these characteristics from my readings and my own understanding. These are presented here in no hierarchical order and are viewed as being interrelated.

The first characteristic is *purpose*. Indigenous methodology should contribute to the collective growth and achievement of the entire cosmos. Smith (1999) affirms, "research is highly institutionalized through disciplines and fields of knowledge, through communities and interest groups of scholars, and through the academy....All of these research activities are carried out by people who in some form or another have been trained and socialized into ways of thinking, of defining and of making sense of the known and unknown" (p. 124). For Aboriginal people to imitate such research practice would be misguided. The western ideological structure of research does not provide a suitable context within an integrated Aboriginal worldview. In order to achieve our purpose as Aboriginal people we must become proactive locally, regionally, nationally, and globally in conducting holistic research.

Healing can occur through various practices and can be defined in various ways. In this paper, the healing process can be summarized through the words offered by an elder: "power and wealth of our people come from the strength of our culture: to increase *cultural power, wealth, and strength,* one must give it (culture) away by sharing it with others" (cited in Archibald, 1995, p. 342). When our cultural practices, beliefs, and values are lacking, so is our wealth as a strong nation and people. By honoring and celebrating cultural practices and beliefs in academia a comfortable balance can be established and become a healing mechanism for Aboriginal people.

Second, maintaining *values* and the *belief system* should be a fundamental practice when conducting research. Failure to take this into account can have detrimental effects on the researcher and the community, especially for researchers who conduct research in their own communities. Failure to maintain values and beliefs may halt

further research that could benefit the community and result in decisions to shun future Aboriginal researchers.

These values include respect, reciprocity, a humble nature, and cultural sensitivity. Alfred (1999) asserts, "We have a responsibility to recover, understand, and preserve these values, not only because they represent a unique contribution to the history of ideas, but because renewal of respect for traditional values is the only lasting solution to the political, economic, and social problems that beset out people" (p. 5).

The third characteristic involves *processes*. "These are not goals or ends in themselves. They are processes which connect, inform and clarify the tensions between the local, the regional and the global. They are processes which can be incorporated into practices and methodologies" (Smith, 1999, p. 116). The Medicine Wheel[5] is a good illustration of this. The Medicine Wheel is a circular sacred symbol that is always expressed in four, for example, the four directions: North, East, South, and West. The four seasons: Winter, Spring, Summer, and Fall. The balance of life: spiritual, physical, mental, and emotional. The "medicine wheel can be used to help us see or understand things we can't quite see or understand....the medicine wheel is an ancient and powerful symbol of the Universe. It is a silent teacher of the realities [and processes] of things. It shows the many different ways in which all things are interconnected. Beyond that, it shows not only things that are, but also things that could be " (Lane, Jr. et al., 1984, pp. 9 & 32).

Hampton (1995) states, "this way of thinking is sacred in the sense that it is bigger than anything I might say. It helps me to understand in that it stimulates my thoughts and feelings rather than being contained in my words. It structures some ceremonies and, as Allen Wolfleg (1979) said, 'Ceremonies are something we usually do more than talk about'" (p. 16).

Ceremonies are a way of existing in this spiritual world and of relating and connecting Aboriginal people to the spiritual realm, for example, sweat lodges, pipe ceremonies, dreams, or vision quests. Similarly, symbols become useful intangible tools that provide guidance. For example, the use of the circle is central to Aboriginal practice and permeates Aboriginal cosmology and provides guidance when decisions are made

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[5] Medicine Wheel is a useful contemporary metaphor

(Ross & Ross, 1992). The ceremonies and symbolic significance of the circle involve processes that not only promote a renewal of the spirit and all living entities, but also provide a foundation for our very being.

As Smith (1999) writes, "the process is far more important than the outcome. Processes are expected to be respectful, to enable people, to heal and to educate. They are expected to lead one small step further towards self-determination" (p. 128).

A fourth characteristic of Indigenous research methodology pertains to *Indigenous data sources* that constitute an important part of Aboriginal culture. Such sources include art, music, pictographs, cosmology, dreams, story telling, and Elders. I will elaborate on the last three sources although all are inextricably interwoven.

A) Dreams. Dreams are mystical and spiritual phenomena that awaken a deeper level of consciousness that affect everyday life. Visions can be in the form of dreams and Aboriginal "healers" or "helpers" can come into the dreams. The knowledge and power that evolve from dreams are not to be underestimated.

B) Story telling. Story telling is a means of transmitting knowledge, wisdom, history, and visions to successive generations. It weaves generations together. Stories facilitate with great ease, and many times with humor, a recollection and recording of life experiences that are integral to Aboriginal people. Incorporating storytelling into research is articulated by Smith (1999) in this way: "Story telling, oral histories, the perspectives of elders and of women have become an integral part of all indigenous research. Each individual story is powerful. But the point about the stories is not that they simply tell a story, or tell a story simply. These new stories contribute to a collective story in which every indigenous person has a place" (p. 144). Story telling is probably one of the best sources and most culturally appropriate way of obtaining information. It also allows the story teller the freedom to share what he/she feels is important, without feeling restricted or limited by the researcher.

C) Elders. The knowledge and wisdom of the Elders are most invaluable. Elders are often considered to be the repositories of knowledge for Aboriginal people and thus become the best resources. Their wisdom is something that may not necessarily be written or theoretically explained, but the accumulated knowledge of Elders can be preserved through the transfer of knowledge and guidance.

Fifth, understanding *community* is an essential characteristic of Indigenous methodologies. Beyond the individual exists a community that embodies a particular social and political structure derived from a value and belief system. Smith (1999) articulates community and community research in this way:

> Defining community research is as complex as defining community. For example, 'the community' is regarded as being a rather different space, in a research sense, to 'the field'. 'Community' conveys a much more intimate, human and self-defined space, whereas 'field' assumes a space 'out there' where people may or may not be present. What community research relies upon and validates is that the community itself makes its own definitions. (pp. 126-127)

Conducting community action research is a process that is encouraged by Linda Smith (1999). This approach focuses on specific issues, problems, or interests of the community that will benefit the community in all aspects. Community action research projects "not only enable communities but also enable indigenous researchers to work as researchers within their own communities" (Smith, 1999, p. 127). It is important for Aboriginal researchers to understand the community, have the capacity to establish relationships, and respect the autonomy of individuals, even within their home community. Many Aboriginal people conducting research in their home community may not necessarily be equipped to do research of this kind.

Alfred (1999) believes that, "Communities that commit themselves to self-conscious traditionalism will find that in translating and adapting traditional concepts to modern realities, they will come to embody the characteristics that make up the contemporary ideal of a strong indigenous nation" (p. 82). Some examples of concepts he outlines include: wholeness with diversity; shared culture; communication; respect and trust; and strong links to the outside world. His belief is that these concepts and practices are steps towards self-determination.

My Research Plan

I propose a framework that will help me achieve a better understanding of Indigenous methodologies, as well as honoring Indigenous research practices according to Smith (1999) and Alfred (1999), and hopefully Aboriginal people. This includes bringing together Aboriginal contexts and western principles of doing research in a way

that is respectful to both. Much of this is a result of weaving Aboriginal contexts and concerns into a framework of ways of doing western academic research.

Method

Design of Study

At the beginning of my study, I found myself searching to house my research into one of the many families of qualitative research. This process was difficult for me because I believe Indigenous research methodologies have exceptional characteristics and data sources that make up the distinct and unique nature of ways in which knowledge of Aboriginal people can be collected and understood. However, I have coupled both Indigenous research methodologies and western research methodologies as follows: My process entailed working towards maintaining an Indigenous framework throughout my study based on life experiences shared through stories. In order to hear the women's stories, I chose to use a qualitative technique of semi-structured interviews which enabled the women to share information freely. Using stories as a method for transmitting knowledge is an Indigenous technique and it facilitated the process with great ease as a way of gathering life experiences that were integral to the academic journey of the women in my study. Nevertheless, I may have compromised the Indigenous approach by focusing on western concepts of success and high achievement.

This study is based on life experiences of Aboriginal women shared through stories that were guided by semi-structured interview questions in order to gain a greater understanding of the facilitative factors that contribute to their outstanding academic achievement. The semi-structured interview questions were relevant to my focus. The questions created a setting for thought and reflection that gave the respondents the freedom to include information that they felt was important. They also provided room for the women to share through story telling in a manner that was rich with information and emotion.

Respondent Group

My study involved four outstanding Aboriginal women who differ in their life experiences. I sought diverse cultural, geographic, family and community backgrounds. My principal criteria for selecting Aboriginal women who have achieved academic

success were: 1) Women with an earned or nearly completed doctorate degree; 2) Women who are working with or on behalf of Aboriginal people in Western Canada; 3) Women who identify themselves as Aboriginal, whether that be Status, Non-status, Treaty, or Metis. Like Brayboy (2000), I grapple with the idea of defining who is an Aboriginal. This is a complex and sensitive issue to many. As Brayboy (2000) points out, "what makes one a 'real Indian' is never clear cut and, like culture, it is dynamic, contextual, and situational" (p. 419); 4) Women who have been brought up within the Aboriginal culture and identify with their culture.

Data Collection

Before proceeding with my data collection I completed an application for ethics review, and received approval for conducting my study (See Appendix). I proceeded in the following ways to collect my data. In identifying my respondent group of Aboriginal women doctorates, I began with those whom I know. Berg (2001) states, "When developing a purposive sample, researchers use their special knowledge or expertise about some group to select subjects who represent this population" (p. 32). I began by writing a letter to each woman in which I outlined my research study, and followed up with a phone call to verify interest and confirm participation in the study, and a personal visit to each of the women who agreed to participate. The letter described my research, the data gathering analysis processes, and ethical considerations. In total, I have made contact and inquired with seven women. Three of the women did not participate in this study because of busy schedules.

In the Aboriginal context, following cultural protocol is essential even before any type of research is conducted. At all times participants should be shown respect and the practice of reciprocity should be provided (Graveline, 1998). Before I began the initial interview process, it was important for me to follow cultural protocol. During my personal visits, this included offering the women tobacco and a small gift in return for the knowledge they were about to share. After this process was complete, and the women graciously accepted my offering, it assured me that it was satisfactory to continue with the process.

I reviewed my research description with each participant during our personal visit. I elaborated on my research description so that the participant was fully aware of the

expectations and the interview process that was about to take place. I assured the participant that confidentiality would be maintained, and that she would have the freedom to opt out of the study at any time (Berg, 2001; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). This was also detailed in a consent form that I had each sign.

The interviews were conducted at a location of the respondent's choice. Consent was given to audio-tape the interviews. Two interviews were conducted in private homes, one in an office, and the fourth interview elsewhere. Three of the women were interviewed twice. One was interviewed three times. The length of each interview was approximately one and a half hours, with the exception of the fourth participant who was interviewed three times at approximately one hour each time.

The data collection method that was used for this study was stories using a semi-structured interview format. This approach was used so that I could honour the cultural practice of sharing stories. Also, this strategy allowed for deviation from the interview questions in order for the participant to include what she felt was important.

Data Analysis

I followed the data analysis procedure of Berg (2001). I began my analysis with an "inductive approach" in which, as Berg (2001) suggests, "begins with the researchers "immersing" themselves in the documents (that is, the various messages) in order to identify the dimensions or *themes* that seem meaningful to the producers of each messages" (p. 245). I immersed myself in the literature to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Aboriginal women. Then, after I transcribed all the interviews, I immersed myself in the transcripts, in order to identify the themes that emerged from the interviews. The transcripts were than coded into themes. The highlighting approach was useful because categories emerged and I was than able to identify the appropriate coding frames.

Trustworthiness

The life experiences described in my analysis are fragments of a life story. Because I did not have the opportunity to hear the life story, it becomes selective, and the degree to which it is selective may pose a threat to validity.

However, several strategies were used in order to ensure trustworthiness of the data coding. The participants gave their consent to audio-tape the interview; it was then

transcribed by me, and a member check was conducted to ensure accuracy in recording the participant's answers and for the purposes of editing the transcriptions. The member check process consisted of sharing my transcriptions and interpretations with respective participants. Being an Aboriginal woman myself and the researcher, I acknowledge that my own personal bias may have affected my interpretations of the data. However, in order to minimize researcher bias and to enhance credibility, I shared my transcripts with a colleague who provided feedback on my themes and interpretation of the data. I also consulted with my advisor on a consistent basis.

Limitations

The selected group of Aboriginal women is not intended to be representative of all Aboriginal women, and the findings of the study may not be generalizable to Aboriginal women as a whole. It is recognized that the end result of this research is to write short narratives of life experiences of four Aboriginal women.

The purpose in conducting this study is to explore the facilitating factors that have influenced the journeys of outstanding Aboriginal women who have achieved or are about to complete doctorates. My involvement in the lives of the selected Aboriginal women was limited because I can only interpret what I believe they have shared with me during the interviews. Finally, I am only privy to specific aspects of their lives for the purposes of this study, not their whole life story.

Delimitations

The following delimitations are imposed in this study: only four Aboriginal women were interviewed and data were collected only in parts of Western Canada, for reason of researcher convenience. This study focused on life experiences of Aboriginal women who have achieved academic success. It does not attempt to explain developmental theories towards high achieving women. This is outside the scope of this study. Because of the nature of the methodology only the qualitative interview method was used. This method alone proved to be sufficient in gathering the stories.

Significance of the Study

I hope my proposed research will contribute in the following ways: First, I hope that it will make a scholarly contribution to the literature on and about Aboriginal women. My goal is to write an article based on this story for publication in a refereed

journal. Hopefully the outcome will contribute to the knowledge base of Aboriginal women's progress through high academic achievement. Second, I hope this will assist universities in making their programs more accessible to Aboriginal women. An effective program would include elements of support, Elders, Aboriginal culture, talking circles, and support groups, at all levels of education. This may facilitate a perspective that might enhance a young women's view on education. Third, hopefully my research will help to achieve a greater understanding of the facilitative factors which influence the outstanding educational achievements of Aboriginal women. Four, the significance of my study may be encouraging to Aboriginal parents in setting a nurturing environment for their daughters. Lastly, I hope my research will inspire those women on their journey towards a doctorate or those pondering the idea of entering doctorate studies.

CHAPTER IV: THE FINDINGS
HONOURING THE WOMEN'S STORIES

I have separated the findings from the discussion of the findings because it is important to honour what the women have said. I felt that I needed to be true to their words and this is my way of doing this. Chapter IV presents the women's stories and Chapter V presents my discussion of their stories.

My Search for Appropriate Names

My search for an appropriate pseudonym for each of the women in this study has brought me to an interesting insight that I would like to share. I provided the opportunity for the women to choose their own pseudonym, either in an Indigenous language or in English. Two of the women provided me with Indigenous names. These two women have indicated that they cannot be identified by the names they have provided, and given that I understand the symbolic meaning behind these names, I decided to honour their choice and retain the names. The other two women in this study wanted me to choose their pseudonyms for them. I sought to provide Indigenous names for these women for the sole purpose of this study. I did not feel comfortable in choosing the Indigenous names for the two women because I am not fluent in my language and I felt proper protocol needed to be followed.

I followed cultural protocol and met with an Elder to help me come to some resolution in this process and in choosing an appropriate name. I had shared with him that throughout my writing I had been using two Indigenous names and two English names. I stated that I found this odd and wanted to replace the two English names with Indigenous names. He pondered the idea and we talked. I found his thought process through our discussion to be profound and extremely interesting. It helped me understand my process in this study even more. The Elder suggested I remain with the two English names. He stated that I "should maintain the balance with the Indigenous and English names, because this is something we need to do more of – balance the two worlds – in this era we need them both…this will bring balance to your work." I found this to be profound because at this point I did not even share the design of my study in weaving both an Indigenous and western methodology together. He brought comfort to my conflicting thoughts on choosing an appropriate pseudonym.

Profile of the Participants

The women in this study come from diverse cultural, geographic, family, and community backgrounds. I wanted to discover if common themes would emerge among women from varied backgrounds. Provided below are brief descriptions of the four women who range in age from the early 40s to the mid-50s. These descriptions are written so as to keep the identities of the women confidential; identifying details are omitted.

Iskwew was raised on the reserve in a small community with neighboring towns close by. Much of her growing up years were spent in the residential schools. She came from a traditional home. Both of her parents were very strong in their cultural upbringing of their large family. Her parents have now passed on into the spirit world. She is divorced and is a grandmother. The English translation of Iskwew is "woman," implying mother, teacher, nurturer, earth, keeper of traditions.

Justine was born on the reserve but was not raised on the reserve. The majority of her childhood was spent in a suburban area. She has two children. She comes from a mixed racial background. Her parents divorced when she was a young teenager. She comes from a large family and was poor growing up. Justine was not raised with her Aboriginal culture and did not have access to community elders. Her mother influenced her in learning about the culture and finding the elders.

Chiiman grew up on the reserve in a small remote community. She attended residential school and comes from a large family. Chiiman spent most of her life in her community although she had to relocate to a city to obtain a formal education and she has been there since. Although her parents may have had no formal education, that did not stop them from teaching a traditional education to their children. Her parents have passed on into the spirit world. Chiiman is married and has no children.
The English translation of Chiiman is "canoe," implying a carrier of people. Because a canoe is made from Mother Earth, it derives from the land.

Paula was raised in a medium-sized city in which there was an Aboriginal minority. She grew up in a poor home even though her parents worked all their lives. She did not have as many siblings compared to the other four women. She spent much of her

growing up years with her grandmother; however, her parents were very influential in her life. She is married with two children.

Presenting the Stories

Thematic analysis was used to identify and describe five major themes that emerged from the life experiences that influenced the journey of Iskwew, Chiiman, Paula and Justine towards academic achievement. I will begin with a major theme - the Effects of Colonization - as described by the women. Although I begin my findings with a dismal picture of the lives of these women, I felt it was necessary to describe the racial difficulties they experienced during their growing up years. The challenges and hindrances are revealed continuously throughout my presentation of their life experiences, but the focus is primarily on the inner drive and passion that has helped these women through hardships. The sub-themes that emerged from the Effects of Colonization are the Oppressed Oppressing, Early School Experiences, and Racism. The second theme, a key theme that resonates throughout the stories, is Connecting with the Aboriginal Culture and Tradition. The sub-themes that exemplify this are Spirituality, Belonging to a Community, and Contributing back to Community. The third theme is the Inner Drive and Personal Persistence of the women viewed in Family Influence, Formal Education, and Employment. This is followed by another major theme of Mentorship and Role Models. The importance of mentorship and the role models who have been influential in the lives of the women are viewed under Teachings from the Elders, Influence of Women, and Support Groups. Finally, a discussion of their Vision and Purpose and the significance of their doctorate is presented. I have included the line numbering of the transcripts to enhance the validity of the stories that were shared.

Effects of Colonization

All four women spoke about the effects of colonization, with specific emphasis of the oppressed oppressing, early school experiences, and racism.

The Oppressed Oppressing

Paula emphasized the notion that those who are oppressed tend to oppress each other. One prime example of the effects of colonization is the oppression of women by other women. Colonization may be well documented in the literature but many, including

some Aboriginal women, do not understand the effects of colonization. Paula stated her view as follows:

> I think all of our women need to understand colonization and the effects of that oppression because that is another thing that hurts our communities, and it hurts our women. I see that our women do not want to share and part of it is this hierarchy that they have bought into. Part of it is not understanding the effects of colonization because we turn around and we oppress our own and who do we oppress? We oppress our women. We oppress the same gender and the same community members. The women are the back-bone of our communities. (Lines 755-761)

Paula emphasized that women who behave in oppressive ways have been oppressed themselves and can only see that the way to get ahead must be at the expense of others. Justine referred to this as the one-way finger pointing. "We can point the finger and we are famous for doing this – pointing the finger out there – at what is being done wrong, but are we taking responsibility for what we should be doing ourselves? It makes me angry when I see the one-way finger pointing" (Lines 738-741).

Another prime example of the effects of colonization is the oppression of women by men. For example, Iskwew was badly hurt when she discovered that her husband, an Aboriginal man, lived a life that did not include her and their children after becoming an entrepreneur and moving away from the family home. She says, "Once he moved away and had his own business I was never a part of that world. People didn't even know that he was married to me. He lived a very private life as far as keeping us separate from his world. A lot of people didn't know who I was or if he had kids" (Lines 853 – 856).

Justine had a similar experience but it was with her father, a non-Aboriginal man. She learned of this "dark side" to her family background through her mother and the little that she remembers herself. Her father never revealed to his mother, Justine's grandmother, that he had a family, an Aboriginal family. Justine recalls,

> my father left the house to go and have Christmas dinner with his mother, pretending that there was no other family…the shame that my mother felt…my mom had a nervous breakdown at that time. Part of the nervous breakdown was her going to meet my dad's mother, introducing herself to her and telling her about her grandchildren. I was young, but I still have a memory of how traumatic this was in our home. But as it turned out, my granny was the most beautiful person, she embraced my mother, this Indian woman who showed up on her doorstep telling on her son. (Lines 474-482).

Early School Experiences

The women recalled events and feelings during their early school experiences that were not well understood at the time but were very hurtful. Chiiman and Iskwew had to leave home to attend residential school. They remember the pain of being separated from their families and the harsh experiences of the assimilation process. For Chiiman, the pain still lingers and the memory is still lucid.

> I stayed [in Residential School] for 10 months. The first year I really wanted to go home for Christmas and I wrote to my mom....She was really trying hard to get money for me to come home on the bus. She said she would send the money...I kept hoping she would send the money, but I never received the letter...I think there were about four or five of us that stayed behind for Christmas. About two days before everyone returned from the holidays, the priest called me downstairs....He said, this letter came for you, it is from your mom, it came before Christmas, I thought it was best that you stay here and not go home. (Lines 44-55)

> ...when I didn't get the letter, it was my mom and dad that I got mad at. It wasn't the system or the priest or the nuns. When the priest told me about what he did, he basically took control of me and he belittled my parents and took their responsibility away from them. And part of when I speak up sometimes, it comes out of that experience. I don't like it when people – priests, nuns, whoever – telling us what is good for us. (Lines 58-64)

Iskwew was taken back by her experience of how difficult it was to be accepted as a young girl: "As a teen it really bothered me that people wouldn't accept us, that I could never be friends with white people. I wanted to be but they wouldn't. I didn't have the self-confidence or self-esteem to push my way into their circles. I just wanted to be accepted then" (Lines 455-458).

Although Paula did not attend residential school, she had to leave home to attend public school because she was from a remote area with no schools nearby. Paula recalls, "When I look back at that now, it was almost like residential school because when I was in grade one I had to leave home and when I was in high school I still had to leave home (Lines 40-41).

Justine also attended public school. However, her early school experiences were shaped by being the only Aboriginal student present. She stated, "One thing that stands out for me in my elementary and high school experience, that I think is unusual in today's

world, is that there was no other Aboriginal people in the neighborhood, in any of those classes all through those twelve years of school" (Lines 9- 12).

The early school experiences of the women resulted in confusion and lack of confidence. As Iskwew shared her experiences in the residential school she noted, "As a child growing up at home I wasn't shy in the family, but outside of it, someplace along the line, I lost my voice. Even within the community I never spoke for myself; I had my younger sister and older brother do all the talking for me, right through most of my childhood and my teenage years" (Lines 35-38). Justine also emphasized being shy throughout her experiences in the public school system.

> I hated school when I was a kid. I was pathologically shy as a child. I was terrified of classrooms and opening my mouth and questioning, all of those things. I'm not sure why or what was in my background to make me that way, because I don't remember not being that way… My school years were not happy ones really and I didn't do well, although my older brother and sister did really well in school. I don't know that they would say that they had the same experience of being in that community, with racist comments and stuff. But I did. (Lines 29-35)

> I was invisible pretty much all through school. That is what I wanted, I wanted to be invisible because I was so shy. I didn't want to be called on, I didn't want to be front and center…. Nowhere in my school did I ever have anyone acknowledge me or encourage me. I was invisible all through school. (Lines 246-251 & 720-721)

These challenges of separation from family, feelings of isolation and loneliness, lack of acceptance, and lack of confidence, faced at a young age were exacerbated by experiences of racism.

Racism

Racial discrimination was evident in the experiences of the women who attended residential school. Chiiman emphasized that she may not have recognized racism at first by saying, "I was blind to it probably" (Line 176). She soon began to feel it when she was in an all-girls school in grade ten.

> The [non-Aboriginal] girls in the all girls school openly said, to the eight of us that were there, that the girls from the reserves were dumb. After a while it started to get to me. I started feeling down on myself and especially when I didn't do well on a test or something. I thought maybe I am, I didn't understand and so I failed my grade 10…It was deadening. (Lines 181-187)

Iskwew distinctly remembers the discriminatory treatment towards herself and the other Aboriginal children:

> They would call all the Indian kids to go to the office and they would check our hair for lice, check our hands to see if we washed them, our necks, our feet. It was dehumanizing. I remember in grade six I use to be referred to as 'having the Indian germs.' I remember the first day going to school and I hung my coat beside them and when I went into class I saw a seat towards the back and when I sat down all of the kids got up and moved out. Then next day I sat in a different spot and the same thing happened, all the kids moved. During recess they would take my coat and they would have this broom and throw it up all over the place and holler 'Indian germs' or someone would come and touch me and say 'Indian germs.' (Lines 414-422)

The young women had come to believe in a superior race (the majority group) and inferior race (the minority). Iskwew was told, "We were not good enough, we were often told that we could never compete with the white kids and that they were a very superior race and of course when there is a superior race there is an inferior race. We were the inferior race" (Lines 32-34). Justine had similar experiences: "It was something that caused confusion and shame for me, not really understanding what that was all about but knowing that it had something to do with Indians being inferior, having that experience in the community I grew up in" (Lines 12-15).

Justine's encounter with racism was evident. Her teachers did not take an interest in her because of her Aboriginal background. She said,

> There was racism in the schools. I think it was at least partly because I came from an Indian home and that was so foreign to any teacher I ever had, to any teacher in the whole school I think. It was a form of silent racism. The self-fulfilling prophecy that if your teacher doesn't expect you to do well because you're this or that – Indian in my case – then you will not. You will raise or lower your expectations of yourself according to the adults' expectations of you. (Lines 944-949)

For the women in this study, the effects of colonization included oppression, disturbing early school experiences, and racism. The women shared heartrending, powerful stories - painful because of the trauma and shame, but powerful because these women have continued to journey through those experiences. Much of their learning and subsequent healing occurred through their connection with their culture, and ultimately to a sense of wholeness in themselves.

Connecting with Aboriginal Culture and Tradition

The importance of the Aboriginal culture and the traditions was and is extremely important in the journey of all the women. The women do not claim to know all that the culture and traditions offer, but they emphasize that it was by embracing their identity as Aboriginal women they found guidance and help through the challenges they faced. This is seen in the following sub-themes that emerged from the stories: spirituality, belonging to a community, and contributing back to the community.

Spirituality

When these women speak of spirituality, they are not necessarily referring to any form of religion; they speak more of cultural traditions and practices that stem from spiritual beliefs. A turning point for all the women was their first experience with ceremony. For Iskwew, one of her first experiences of a cultural ceremony occurred in the 70s when she first started going to sweats. This first exposure caused her great confusion that stemmed from the residential schools. Only later did she sort out her confusion and today she can laugh about this experience:

> I had so many fears. I carried that with me right through. So when I went into the sweat lodge I was torn. [I thought], "Is this what the nuns used to say, that some day the devil would come in a different form and tempt us, and maybe the devil would be in the form of a relative?" And I looked at my mom and I thought, she can't be the devil. Really! And it was dark in there and the rocks were just red from the heat. I thought, "What am I doing here?" Is this why they called us pagans? In the sweat when I listened to the prayers they were not talking about the devils or evil, they were talking about the creator and giving thanks for life, praying for other people's strength and praying for love so that they could be kind. I kept going back [to the sweats]. (Lines 168-178)

Justine does not remember ever experiencing a ceremony or any evidence of it during her growing up years. She stated that at home "being Indian was never associated with ceremony, with prayer, with old traditions, or those kinds of cultural experiences. My reserve had two churches on it. So I don't remember any kind of traditional spirituality growing up" (Lines 193-195). Her most meaningful experience was when "she started to seek out the teachings of our culture." Justine's first experience was also in the 70s when she attended a large yearly gathering of Aboriginal people from across Canada. She recalls, "My first exposure was probably when I was in my late teens. It came with this [large gathering]. They had pipe ceremonies and sunrise ceremonies. You

could sit with the elders all day. They had round dances or powwows every night" (Lines 387-390). Justine emphasized how this was an exciting time for her and how "it relates to something inside of us when we start to be exposed to ceremony, culture or tradition" (Lines 197-198).

Justine quoted Lionel Kinunwa, a great scholar and elder, who describes this feeling as "buried deep inside of us. It is in our bones. In our cells, in our blood, are the memories of our ancestors. So when you connect with something at a meaningful level you feel it at a cellular level." Iskwew echoed Kinunwa's sentiments when she stated,

> I really believe in being guided by our forefathers, being guided by our grandmothers, I really believe that. I think if you are open to it you begin to see that… I could no longer doubt that there is a connection between us and the spiritual world. I constantly asked for guidance. I was open to guidance as much as I feared everything around me, and I believe that came through with my thoughts changing. (Lines 196- 201)

For Paula, connecting with the Aboriginal culture and tradition also became a turning point for her own personal growth and development, her "own sense of reconnection to spirituality and to embracing the culture" (Lines 432-433). Her efforts to seek this route "were a result of pain and trauma" (Line 434). The experience of losing a close family member to death caused great pain and grief that led Paula on a healing journey. This journey became a major turning point in her life. She started to seek out spiritual retreats, sweats and talking circles, to guide her through this experience. Her inner resolve and persistence were admirable through such tragedy.

> I remember driving down the road one night and feeling alone and feeling there has to be much better in life than what I'm feeling right now, this whole sense of aloneness, this pain around grief, loss, and death, and all that was happening in life. Since that point, major things have happened in my life. The first thing was of course this death, and after driving on the road that day, it seemed that a whole new era of things happened in my life that I believe now, as I look back on it, despite the pain at the time, it was meant to happen, in the bigger picture of everything that the Creator had in mind for me in my life's journey…[this death] was a turning point (424-432)

She considers her journey to be an ongoing healing journey. Paula confirms, "I'm still on this journey of determining who I am and my identity as an Aboriginal woman. I'm on that journey, I participate in women's circles, I participate in sweats, in sharing, and

meditation with other women. This whole journey is a life long learning journey" (Lines 510-513). Chiiman talks about the importance of knowing who you are as an Aboriginal woman and the importance of retaining the language that is important to our spiritual being.

When Iskwew, Chiiman, Paula, and Justine shared their powerful experiences with the culture they balanced their stories with fundamental personal beliefs. These beliefs could be spiritual or stem from spiritual beliefs. They attribute much of their success in their journey to the belief and guidance of the Creator.

For instance, life's hard lessons guided Paula towards the belief in a higher power. She spoke of,

> The whole sense of spirit. I always thought I had these beliefs and these values and faith in a power greater than myself, but when my world came tumbling down upon me, that is when I reconnected big time with faith and spirituality and this sense of Creator out there and a power greater than me to help. (Lines 858-861)

It was power gained from spirituality and belief. She further noted, "…things do happen for a reason. In my younger years, I was really essentially being groomed for something that I didn't even know to this day that I would become" (Lines 89-92). Likewise, Iskwew believed, "The Creator gave me those lessons so I could talk about them and tell about them" (Line 980). She went on to say:

> I think everybody is given a purpose and we are also born with gifts. I think the experiences that we are given all direct us to the path that we are supposed to be on. It's no coincidence that I was the eldest. I had to learn to organize my siblings, to give responsibility to them, to supervise them. I really believe that my life is so aligned right now that I feel this is where I'm supposed to be. I have been guided to where I'm supposed to be. (Lines 994-999)

Justine also believes "that all things happen for a reason -- especially the ones we don't understand" (Line 271). As she elaborated,

> The decisions we make without making decisions, or the turns we take without making conscious decisions. I think they are there for a reason. My friend and I talk about the fact that there are no coincidences; they are only perceived that way. It's a word you can call it, but really we are guided towards certain things. All the things I have done have led me to this place. Everything that has happened in my life. (Lines 272-276)

Evidently, how we live our life and what we say has an impact on who we become. Justine advises that we must be careful about what we say. She believes "that sometimes when you say something, it is already en route to happening" (Line 621). For example,

> It occurred to me in the last two or three months…I did an exercise with students one day…it was writing down your long-term goals -- what is your dream? I wrote that down, and I think that is the first time I ever said aloud that I'm going to get a PhD and I'm going to be a professor one day. I think I said it for their benefit so that we could all reach for the top. It just occurred to me recently that that is when I put it out there, so be careful what you say. (Lines 621-628)

Spirituality and personal fundamental beliefs are part of the phenomena of the Aboriginal worldview: individuals are guided toward the truth of their existence, but it is up to the individual to seek that truth, and finding that truth is part of their life journey. Iskwew best summarizes the idea of bringing the academic and traditional world together:

> I guess what really has come through in all my years of a master's and doctorate education is I have been journeying right along with learning about the culture, language, ceremonies, so I have invited that. I brought both of them together….my source of strength comes from our culture. It is not just talking about culture and knowing the ceremonies, it is living it. (Lines 345 – 347 & 946)

The idea of "living it" is expanded upon in the following discussions on the importance of being part of a community and contributing back to the community.

Belonging to a Community

The importance of being accepted and understood by a community was expressed by all the women. Community was an important aspect in their development. Justine discusses community this way:

> I think one of the things within our culture that is different is the whole idea of community. It is different. Maybe that is partly because as First Nations people we have community in terms of our reserves and in terms of our band and the boundaries of those reserves. That is one definition of community. There is a connection between all of us within that community. Most of us are related in one way or another, even in the larger reserves…. If I were to break down the different aspects of our worldview, community is one of those things that we view differently than mainstream culture. I may live in [a city], in a neighborhood, but I don't consider that my community…I can refer to the Aboriginal community in a city or province or in Canada and we all know what that means. (Lines 773-790)

Justine gave more emphasis to the importance of community because much of her life was lived off the reserve, and she felt that she always stood out because of her race. For a long time she "was away from the Aboriginal community." Justine said, "It took me awhile…to find an Aboriginal community….For two years I was so lonesome for contact with Native people. I remember my mom came out one time, I just found myself crying with her because there was just something missing. That is when I knew that I needed to go and find the community. I did" (Lines 278-285).

When Justine first started to attend the large Canada-wide gatherings of Aboriginal people, she experienced real pride in being part of that experience. She recalls,

> It was such an awesome experience…there was like a revival and reclaiming of pride in our Indigenous selves, an awareness that we had to bring youth and elders together… There was a real pride…. the significance of that was belonging. It was belonging to a community. It was belonging to other people and the whole idea of fighting for something that was so important and so basic…. Being able to come out to those [gatherings] offered something that I wasn't getting at home. (Lines 155 – 192)

Once Justine found comfort in a community, she started to view herself differently and felt a sense of belonging and acceptance. She confirms this by stating, "It was the environment that I was in that changed the way I saw myself in a world, because I could now see myself part of a community" (Lines 336-337). Chiiman's experience was different; she maintained her grounding in the Aboriginal community by always making a point to visit her reserve. She said, "I think going home and spending some time with my parents always grounded me" (Line 239).

During her travels, Iskwew started to realize that "there are only a few of us in the world in terms of Aboriginal people and then in terms of being Cree people. I just had this experience that has never left me to be proud of who we are…We still have a responsibility to the land and there is still a connection. Despite the fact I live [here], my roots are in [my home community], that is where I am from" (Lines 468-472).

Belonging to a community and maintaining that connection is crucial; equally important is the contribution to building community.

Contributing Back to the Community

For all four women, the underlying reasoning for attending university included a commitment to contributing to the Aboriginal community. This commitment was not limited to their home community; it extends to the larger Aboriginal community as well. As Paula points out, "I have a strong obligation to share and give back…I take that very seriously…wherever I can across this land I [work with] all young people to give back because it is my obligation, not only to my own community and our people in our geographic area, but across the land" (Lines 325-329).

Paula further emphasizes that if we want healthy communities we must share our knowledge. She stated that "…if we want healthy communities, it starts with us, and we must role model it. Therefore, everything I have learned…and working in this collective web system of sharing, I must pass it on to the students I have now" (Lines 334-337). Similarly, Justine believes in sharing her personal story as a way of improving the livelihood of Aboriginal people. She expressed her view this way:

> I would tell people how I didn't do well in school and how I hated school, etc., my story, and they could relate to that. I would say, we don't have to stop, we could do whatever we want, we can and must go beyond that to get graduate degrees, to do our own research, to teach our own people at that level and also the people around us. (Lines 614-618)

The recognition in the community resulting from gaining advanced degrees is important, but it is how we live that is most important, as explained by Paula; "Doctorate degrees are very important. It is who we are, how we live, and how we apply ourselves that is important…It is not because we elevate ourselves. We never elevate ourselves" (Lines 307-311). Iskwew adds to this with her comment: "I encourage everybody to go back to school. It's what you do with it that is important and our responsibility back to our community. I think that is key, that what we learn we try to bring back" (Lines 609 – 611).

I saw great humility in the eyes of Paula when she acknowledged,

> Getting a doctorate has not been a journey of self; it has been a journey of community, family, friends, and my community. In getting this degree it is not about me, it is about our community, it is collectively about all of those people along the way who believed, supported, who helped, who were there financially, who were there morally. (Lines 125-129)

Justine reminds us that although we have a responsibility to contribute back to the community, the community as a whole also has a responsibility. She comments, "within that community, it has always been part of our culture to take responsibility collectively for the well being of the community. That saying 'it takes a whole community to raise a child,' I think that fits perfectly with the way things used to be" (Lines 773-781).

Like the other three women, Paula is determined to help better her community:

> ...when I did finalize my dissertation I dedicated it to all [Aboriginal] kids, all the kids I worked with. So when I look at all of this that was happening when I was studying, it drove me, it helped me to stay focused; that I was on a mission. And I'm still on a mission of making changes in our communities. There was never a time when I was studying in the master's and doctorate that I ever thought of quitting, ever, because when I finished the master's it was without doubt that I would go on to the doctorate. (Lines 198-207)

Examples of the inner drive and personal persistence to continue the academic journey are the focus of the following theme.

Inner Drive and Personal Persistence

All four of the participants shared powerful stories of struggle and how they were able to prevail in their struggles. These stories reveal the persistence and determination that they drew upon as they continued their journey in the face of adversity. To demonstrate this drive and inner resolve, three contexts of life experience deserve distinct attention: family influence, education, and employment.

Family Influence

As Chiiman reflected back on her experience with her family, it was apparent that this was laden with emotion for her. Both her parents have now passed on into the spirit world but it was obvious their spirit remains alive and she extracts from memory their teachings for wisdom and strength.

Chiiman recalled two main experiences with her parents that grounded her and helped her on this journey. I was struck by Chiiman's ability to call on the teachings of her parents to guide her in the academic process, and the strength she gains from these teachings. The first experience was when she left her family and her home reserve after graduating from grade eight to attend residential school. She described this as one of the hardest days of her life.

> Because I was at home and I guess I took it for granted that my parents were there all the time, and my brothers and my sisters. When I left home I realized what I was missing, and so I cried for about three months. Finally in November I phoned my mother and asked her if I could come home because I didn't think I could handle it anymore. She basically said I had to learn to stand on my own two feet. My reaction was, she doesn't like me anymore, she doesn't love me anymore and she doesn't want me to come home. But now I look at it differently. I think that if she would have allowed me to come home, I don't think I would be where I am today. (Lines 18-27)

The second experience was the first evening when Chiiman returned home from the residential school.

> [My mother's] first language was English and she learned to speak Cree and French and she learned [my father's language]. My father was adamant that we all spoke [my father's language]. I remember the first night when I came home from the residential school, we were having supper and I asked my sister to pass the salt and pepper in English and my father just said in [his language], "In this house we speak [our language]." But he did not say it in a mean way. What had happened there was I just got so used to speaking English at the residential schools that it just became natural to me. However, if he hadn't said that I don't think I would have felt that the language was so important. I think that is why I have this passion for it now. (Lines 32-41)

Iskwew remembers her father, who has also passed on into the spirit world, but his teachings live on. She recalls a particular story from her childhood that will always stand out for her:

> The biggest influence I had was when we lived in poverty. We didn't starve and we were not without clothes but we didn't have any extra....After we had been released from residential school [and into the public school system]...we had to clean-up before we could start our homework, so we would start about 9:00 and we were already in high school. In the wintertime my dad would be stoking the fire and sitting there with a cigarette. He would sit there and we would be doing our homework. He would sit up with us. He wouldn't say anything unless we invited him. After we went to bed he would make sure everything was all closed up. My dad was a whiz in math. He knew how to read but the kids thought he couldn't read. So they learned to read in order to teach him to read. (Lines 765 & 904-911)

The teachings of the parents had a major influence on where the women are today. "I guess when I left home I had to grow up somehow in some way in order to move through the system. But I thank my mom and dad for that, because I think even

though I left home early, they gave me enough skills to be able to do it" (Chiiman, Lines 200-203).

Paula also gave credit to her parents for the ability she acquired to work diligently.

> My mother and father worked all of their lives which I know really impacted my life and it impacted who I am today. I know the work ethic that they had, had a significant impact. Growing up in a poor home with times I remember as a child that we didn't have a lot of food and we didn't have fancy food. Knowing what my mother and father did for us, it instilled a work ethic....What it did teach me was, they role modeled hard work and I know that there was never a point in my life when I thought I would quit school, ever. (Lines 11-15 & 498)

As Paula reflects back on her school years, she is grateful for her family. She notes, "who I am today I owe to many people."

Justine also credits her father for the strong work ethic he had. She stated, "My dad worked his whole life...Really strong work ethic, he never missed a day of work, and I'm like that. It is hard for me to miss a day of work....I used to tell my students that as well, 'You know, I never missed classes while I was a student. I just always wanted to be there myself'" (Lines 444-449).

Formal Education

This section includes experiences in formal education beginning with residential school (for two of the women) and extends to post-secondary experiences (for all of them). As Chiiman reflects back on the residential school experience, those experiences make her more determined to pursue her education. She said, "when I talk about that experience I want to take control of my education, I want to be able to learn about what is important to me" (Lines 57-58). Chiiman expressed this poignant idea: "I wanted school so badly or an education I guess" (Lines 188-189). Iskwew yearned, "...as a kid and going into high school, I really wanted to go to university" (Line 1038). These demonstrate yet further examples of the perseverance of both Chiiman and Iskwew.

Paula had an abiding belief that education was the way to make life better. She said, "I always believed that school was the way to make my life better. I always believed that. Kids were dropping out around me; my friends were joking and laughing at me because I was always the one who had the homework done. I was always the one who had everything done for school" (Lines 486-489).

Chiiman had a thirst for education that stemmed from her personal qualities. Although she experienced racism and discrimination in her growing up years, she managed to find meaning in these situations. Chiiman shared a story about an experience after she failed grade ten and how she dealt with her weight problem after attending an all girls school.

> I wanted school so badly or an education I guess. So the Indian agents came during the summer and kept asking me where do I want to go to school. I said, "I don't think I can go back to school." Anyway, they would go away and then return in August. I said, "You know, I've been thinking, I had some time to think about school and I am going to go back." I said, "On one condition." He said, "What's that?" I said, "I want to go back to the same school. There's some things I have to deal with." He said, "I thought you told me you didn't want to go back there." I said, "I have to go back there." Part of my reason was I had to go face all that stuff, because I didn't want to continue to feel ugly. I didn't want to continue feeling dumb. There I went and passed my grade 10. (Lines 188-198)

Paula had a resilient nature. She provided this example through a story she shared with me.

> I can remember as a child growing up there was racism. When I look back on it I was always a fighter, not physically, but I would challenge the status quo. I remember in my grade seven Social Studies class the teacher talking about Native people and I must have had a lot of friends and even though they were non-native, I could still remember to this day them saying, "Come on [Paula], get up there, talk to him, tell him off, tell him off." I stood there and I did; I challenged the teacher. Throughout my life I did that, not in a bad way, not in an aggressive way, but I always would stand up. It is that altruistic state that still stays with me today. (Lines 248-255)

During Chiiman's experience in post-secondary school she began to understand the lessons learned in life; they became more clear to her. She recognized that "there are just different ways how people behave and how people handle things that I started to notice again....As negative as those things were, these are the events that helped me to continue in life" (Lines 130-133). She elaborated with the following:

> ...during my undergraduate degree, sitting in the classrooms, especially anthropology and sociology courses, it seemed like whatever examples they had about groups of people and how they related to one another were always on Aboriginal people. It was positive but the pictures were not always positive about it. It was almost like they were belittling my parents and my brothers and sisters. I just felt like the rest of the students were staring at me, I just wanted to hide

> sometimes you know. And so I guess that is when I started thinking there has to be another way out. (Lines 115-121)

As a result of such experiences in post-secondary education, Chiiman strongly believes in "speaking out" as an Aboriginal person in order to be heard.

Both Justine and Iskwew had mythical perceptions of university. Justine stated,

> I had all of these perceptions of what university was and what a university student had to do, and how smart you had to be. All those myths were broken down in the first year I was here. I started to look at the whole idea differently. (Lines 303-311)

Iskwew reported,

> ...as a kid and going into high school, I really wanted to go to university but I felt that I could never have a place there because it took bright, intellectual, well-versed, well-read people who could succeed in that, so I never saw myself getting there. It was only the opportunities of [my job] that opened those doors for me. (Lines 1038-1039)

Justine had never known anyone who had been to university. She asserts,

> It was a place that was foreign to me. Part of the reason I decided to try and take a course was, because I was a fast typist, Aboriginal students used to come and ask me to type their papers. So I would. I thought, when I was typing the papers, 'was that it, is that all you have to do?' I thought I could do better than that.... I [did have] this fear of failing. I had to always push myself. I used to always shoot for nines...I never missed classes...and if class participation was part of that grading system then I used to push myself to participate...being surrounded by this new group of people who were going to University and they were researching, reading, and they were interesting. They started to stimulate my own thinking about deeper questions about Aboriginal people. It was part of that proactive optimism and enthusiasm, and just that whole fight element that are really prevalent here amongst the students. I was the same age as them. I just became a part of that community and that is what really turned things around. (Lines 61-322)

I admired Justine for her drive to constantly challenge herself. Justine indicated, "I now know that the only way to get over that shyness and that fear is by doing it. When I first started speaking up in University, in classrooms, I didn't recognize the sound of my own voice. That was a big surprise to me to not recognize what you sound like. It's like an echo or something. I was always that way" (Lines 50-53).

Justine shared her thoughts when she first began to ponder the idea of continuing on to the master's level.

> I started taking one course at a time and I did well in that and did well in the next one. Probably by the time I finished my BA, I was already thinking, because again being influenced by people around me, already thinking that well maybe some day I will do a master's degree, and at that time there was almost no Aboriginal students on campus, so it was a big thing. (Lines 603-607)

The idea of continuing into a doctorate came without a doubt for Paula. She reported, "At the doctorate level it wasn't even a question of not going on. It was a matter that this was my obligation, this is my commitment, I'm at this level, I can make it, I can go on. I have the support of my family, I have everyone behind me. Financially, I was getting the support of my community. My own family was supporting me. How could I not go on?" (Lines 220-224). However, once she completed her doctorate degree she surprised even herself. She said, "I would never have guessed 25 years ago that I would be so fortunate to have this opportunity to get a doctorate degree" (Lines 92-93).

Employment

As Chiiman reflected on her earlier life she shared an incident when she had "this bright idea" and found a summer job in the city. When Chiiman was in junior high and high school, she usually went home to her remote community to work for the summer. Chiiman wanted to expand her experience from working on the reserve to working in the city. Her job was as a live-in nanny with a Doctor and his family.

> The Doctor's family hired me and told me I was supposed to cook and do laundry and look after the kids. I thought I can do this. But when I cooked I would go serve their meal in the dining room and I would have to eat in the kitchen....It just wasn't sitting well with me... I can't do this anymore and feel good about myself...I said [to the Doctor], "I have something to tell you, I'm quitting. I can't do this job. It doesn't feel very good." He slammed the newspaper on the table and said, "Do you know what is wrong with you people...you guys never finish anything that you start...you guys are always on welfare." (Lines 82-98)

Chiiman believed this to be another critical experience that inspired her. She emphasized this by her statement, "Again, all those things on how people judge us and how they believe we don't get anywhere. I guess I think about him sometimes, even though he hurt me and he tried to make me feel powerless. I'm sure he did at the time. Those kinds of

things inspire me, no matter how hurtful they are" (Line109). This experience for Chiiman was a challenge in overcoming adversity.

Furthermore, Chiiman emphasized how power was structured and how "people abuse their power and truly believe that they can control people and stop them from doing whatever it is they want to do" (Lines138-141). She turned this idea around and said, "No, they can think whatever they want to think, but I can go and get what I want" (Lines 141-142).

Justine went looking for work in an Aboriginal community within a major city. She found work in a prestigious university institution. She recalls, "I remember being scared to come to university, to even come and work [in a university] because I thought everybody was so smart at the university and I'm not. All those feelings of inferiority came back… After I came and worked here for about year it sure changed the way I saw things" (Lines 299-304).

Justine was influenced in pursuing a higher education as a result of her experience of working in an academic institution. Her job on campus led her to think about "long-term goals." She states,

> I think I definitely was affected by the people around me… Every two years I would get bored with my secretarial job because I was always doing the same thing, different organizations, and that could be stimulating, you know meeting new people and learning new jobs as I moved from one to the other, but I got bored quickly and started moving around. So every two years I would go and find another job but always moving sideways. It was not until I [worked in a university] that I started to see people having long-term goals and talking about contributing to the larger issues for Aboriginal people and the importance of education to do that, so little by little those thoughts crept into my own mind and my own possibilities. It was scary for me to entertain those thoughts… I did feel a sense of pressure [to take courses], but also encouragement. (Lines 580-596)

What influenced Paula in continuing with her education was when she worked as a school principal. "It was part of an internal drive driven by vision and passion to help make things better... I was working with kids that came out of much [pain]" (Lines 139-147). She shared a story that occurred during her term as the principal.

> I would go to smudge with our kids and pray with our elder, and if I wasn't able to go I would stand by the door to the school and I would greet them every day. If they were new kids coming in, and these were all of our Aboriginal kids, they

> would not believe that I was the principal. They believed that the vice-principal, my colleague who was white, they thought he was the principal. (Lines 192-197)

Two issues that arise from these comments are stereotypes of race and gender. Specifically, the Aboriginal children had the belief that an Aboriginal woman, who was kind and caring, could not possibly be the principal. Rather, the children believed the white male to be the principal.

In essence, this became a motivation for her and helped her reach for the next stage of her studies:

> I applied [into the Master's program] and being on my own healing journey and working with these kids and my own family situation being what it was, it provided drive, it provided a passion to make change, vision, wanting to be a change agent, wanting to be part of a change movement. That is what helped me through the Master's degree. (Lines 180-184)

As I listened to their experiences with their family, education, and employment, I acknowledged their perseverance and determination, that I believe became guiding forces on their journey towards a doctorate.

Mentorship and Role Models

The academic accomplishments of the women and the establishment of connection with their Aboriginal selves was not an individual endeavor. There were influential and supportive people in their lives, who helped and guided them in their journey. The support was evident in the sub-themes of mentoring with elders, influence of women, and support groups.

Teachings from the Elders

Others have paved the way to make it easier on succeeding generations. In the Aboriginal culture, past leaders, male and female, who have now become elders pass on the culture and traditions.

Paula reflected on past leaders who fought for education and had a vision for Native people. This gave her the determination and motivation towards her academic studies. She acknowledges the vision of those leaders:

> When I look back now it is part of their journey that now we are obligated to carry on, because they fought, they had a vision, they knew what they wanted and knew what they had to do to get to what they wanted. They had deep passion

> about education and they had commitment and love for the community. They lived it, they fought for it. They have instilled that in us. (Lines 103-107)

Iskwew found comfort and relief amongst the elders who brought understanding to her hardship during her trying marriage and loss of loved ones. The guidance of the elders helped her significantly. Iskwew shared this:

> I went to the elders and they began to mould me back into shape. They gave me a strong foundation. A foundation of a belief system of who I was. I really began to take seriously the ceremonies.... It was like being put together again. But this time with a much more solid foundation, this time it was who I was. I began to get seriously involved in ceremonies. (Lines 257-258)

From 1992 until now, Iskwew said she "really journeyed" under the guidance of the elders. Her "learning has been expanded constantly and challenged." During her doctorate studies, she mentioned that she was able to mentor under the elders during her doctorate studies. Being mentored by the elders contributed to the purpose that Iskwew now envisions for herself and her community. As she consulted with the elders her journey became more transparent. She asserted,

> It became clear in my mind I want to be known in this lifetime as a person who has gone to get the knowledge and wisdom of the elders. I know I will never get what I should have if I had been raised with it, but [I] learn as much as I can so that I can truly be an elder to come from a place of the values that they talk about; a caring, honest person, and someone who is determined and shares... I want them to have someone they can say, 'this person has the information, let's go and ask her.' I have a thirst for knowledge and not just thirst but I have to go and do it and live it. (Lines 356-364)

Furthermore, what influenced Paula was the academic program she was in. She explained how important it was for her to find a program that supported the mentorship of elders along side academic studies and she shared a sample of what she learned through this process:

> I finally found a program that supported our belief system and through that program I continued to mentor with the elders, and I had very academic specific goals established... I think in that way it brought the academic and our way of learning together for me. I began to look at things from a different point of view. I began to observe and analyze things and see how we organize ourselves in ceremony, how everybody has a role, and that no one person can ever run a ceremony by themselves, and no one person can tell other people what to do because it is collective, that each of these people in their roles have a specific role and they invite other people to assist in that area. (Lines 295-303)

Influence of Women

The women who played a significant role in the lives of the four participants were the mothers, grandmothers, mothers-in-law, and female friends or colleagues. These women are looked up to because of their character, strength, and ability to persevere through challenging times, thus becoming the mentors and role models.

I asked this question of Justine: on the basis of your experiences, what do you think it is that we should be doing to help Aboriginal men and women? She provided the following explanation that provides some clarification of the whole idea of role models:

> Some people hate the word role model, but I really think that we as employees or graduate students or Aboriginal people…we educate wherever we go, we also have to model that, we have to model for others around us what it means to be healthy, what it means to take responsibility for our communities and for our children, so it is really important we model those behaviors. Share what we know with other people, in a non-judgmental way. (Lines 634-639)

Iskwew referred to her mother as the ultimate teacher in her life. She said, "My mom had the power of belief. If she believed in you she would let you know and she wouldn't let you forget. That is not just with her children; that was with everyone she came in contact with. That was her role in the community; she was a strong visionary leader, a strong person" (Lines 891-893). As Iskwew reflected back on her journey, she recalled herself thinking of the words uttered by her mother. She said, "I challenged myself to the point where my mother used to say, 'We need people with doctorate degrees,' and to hear her voice as I continued this journey, I could not have done it by myself" (Lines 1039-1041).

Paula acknowledges the influence of her own mother, and is thankful and appreciative of the influence of her grandmother. Paula spent a great deal of time with her grandmother. There was a period of time when Paula had to live with her grandmother to attend school. She remarks, "My grandmother wasn't a women who was a radical by any means. She was a kind caring loving women, and she instilled that in me" (Lines 272-275). Later on in life, when Paula went to University, her mother-in-law became "very instrumental." She described her mother-in-law as "a woman of strong voice and strong leadership" (Lines 80-82).

Justine remembers the strength and courage of her mother. Because of the large number of siblings, she always had to follow her mother whether she liked it or not. She shared a piece of her mother's story that influenced her:

> I had no choice but to follow my mother around. She started to get involved in so many things. The first thing she did was probably go to work outside of the home and my dad kicked and screamed, and all she did was clean people's houses. She would go and make around sixty dollars a week cleaning houses and that was so that she could have the freedom of having her own money because my dad never gave her any money. That was the start of it. I remember all of that. It was also the beginning of the end for their relationship because the more he fought it, the more determined she was to do whatever she wanted and needed to do, to be well. The more she learned, the more she grew, and the more she wanted to learn. It really is a beautiful story of empowerment. (Lines 507-516)

Likewise, Iskwew mentioned that her mother "didn't stop for anything and for anybody." Iskwew further stated that it was her mother who influenced her to seek the guidance of the elders: "She really had a connection to the elders and the community…she had the support and really believed in their knowledge and the wisdom and that they would guide her properly" (Lines 71-74). In addition, Iskwew's mother also influenced her toward cultural practices: "In the 70s I had started going to sweats. [my mom] went back to traditional ways and she invited us to go to a sweat" (Lines 159-165).

Justine was contented to say, "I was lucky having had that void in my background (no cultural upbringing) in terms of the culture to have the mother that I did who went looking for it" (Lines 920-922). When Justine's mother began her healing journey, she was told by a non-native professional, "Go and find your people, where are your elders?" So her mother did exactly that. She went looking for the culture and the elders.

Like Iskwew, Justine "rode the coat tails of [her] mother in her political and militant days back in the 70s" (Line 345). Justine was involved in many of her mother's activities. She said, "My journey also parallels my mother." Her mother was determined to grow culturally and seek meaning through native spirituality. Justine stated that her mother wanted to "find the things that were meaningful to her spirit." Her mother was politically active during the 70s "when the American Indian Movement was big and Wounded Knee was happening." It was obvious that her mother had that fighting spirit at an early age (Lines 527-571).

The influence of women is also seen in support groups, especially the significance of the circle in working with large groups.

Support Groups

A strong support system was seen as an important factor in achievement of a doctorate. Support systems have been intertwined with all of the themes in one way or another. The support group is viewed as representing a circle with the women in this study at the center. Both Men and women have contributed to the circle. This sub-theme includes the support received from men and women through gatherings, as well as support received by women through retreats.

The circle forms the basis of gathering and retreats. Paula emphasized the significance of the circle. She stated, "I am not surprised by what happens in the circle because of the power of the circle" (Line 842). She said that she could not over-emphasize how important it is for women to help each other. Paula also emphasized how community support groups helped her and other community members. Paula and a group of women decided to start forming healing circles. These circles became very large. It was on a volunteer basis. They started with this group of women and then invited their husbands and elders to work with them. "We came together and brought food to celebrate our stories together. Listening is all our people wanted…not to give them solutions because they have the solutions within themselves" (Lines 733-736).

Justine learned a great deal by being involved in Aboriginal women's groups and organizations. She remembers the women fondly as she recalled this experience,

> The most meaningful experience was when I started to seek out the teachings of our culture. I met a group of women. It was like a sobriety group. It was a big emotional rollercoaster dealing with my grief. What it did was it sent me looking for that help…. Those years were tough. I remember when we say we are committed to confronting each other and committed to healing together and what not, it was my job as it was their job to learn and to help each other with kindness, learning the importance of life, to help me to grow in a good way. We did a lot of that in the talking circle, and that is why talking circles are so close to my heart, and that is why I believe in them for what they offer to everyone who sits in them. They are healing and miracles happen in talking circles. (Lines 361-366)

Paula attended a retreat that helped her on her healing journey and made her realize that her story was similar to the ones told by other women:

> Most of those people who helped me were women. I started by doing a retreat for women, it was a spiritual retreat, and I went there totally unprepared. I went in this pain, and I remember crying, thinking there has got to be more to life than what I'm feeling right now.... That whole weekend retreat was with women. Women telling their stories, their pain, their experiences with physical and sexual abuse, emotional and spiritual abuse, and in very candid ways. As I listened to their stories, their stories were very much like my story. (Lines 437-449)

These support groups, as with the support of family and elders, brought friendship, love, kindness, and humility to the lives of the women. The support groups were essential in personal support in achieving a doctorate.

Recognizing and acknowledging the significant people in their lives the women gained an understanding of their own roles and responsibilities. Now that the women have worked towards high academic achievement, they share the significance of their accomplishment through the theme of vision and purpose.

Vision and Purpose

The women in this study have persevered through various hardships; they have overcome adversity, challenged the status quo, and continued their academic journey. As you have read, their journey has not taken an easy path. But they always maintained a vision and purpose throughout their studies, and although their goals may not always have been clear to them, they became more transparent with their life experiences. All four women were very aware of the importance of their accomplishment. I will begin a discussion of this theme with the women viewing their achievement, move into their vision for Aboriginal people, and end with a glance at their purpose in life.

Paula understands her achievement as a collective accomplishment. She said,

> It was a combination of a lot of struggle to get there, financially and the academic hardship. I think it was very humbling because it wasn't an individual accomplishment, it was an accomplishment for our community. It was an accomplishment for everyone... It was going to be what we would use to help us move our world academically. (Lines 278-285)

None of the four women define themselves as successful, but do provide a new look at a familiar topic. For example, Iskwew views success as, "Am I at peace? Yes. If that is success I have gotten there. Even when I was on top of the world financially and [had] a man to depend on, would I consider that my success? No. My success has been

coming into my own, challenging myself to the most ultimate as far as my university degrees..."(Lines 1032-1035).

Similarly, Paula views success as self-discovery. She said,

> When I look at my journey...my success is getting to know myself better. My ability through these lessons that the creator has provided me with...those lived experiences have helped me to be more compassionate, to be more understanding, more loving and giving, to practice those natural laws instead of getting all twisted with jealousy and the anger...that to me is a sense of success; never to forget who I am and where I come from, my obligations to give back to our community, to help women, to help our children. (Lines 768-775)

Paula also believes that success is humility. It is important for her to "respect others in our community...respect the culture...participate in activities...this doctorate degree is only one tool that is going to help" (Lines 800-803).

Justine believes that success is different for everybody. One main ingredient for her is happiness:

> Success is happiness when you have peace of mind, peace of heart when you feel like you are balanced within the four quadrants. That is what happiness is. That is what I'm looking for -- life that would allow me to feel balanced yet challenged -- balanced mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. Challenged in those ways as well... Someone may hold success to be one thing... Achieving a PhD is success in one of those ways. It was a challenge before me and completing it was a form of success, but it is one accomplishment on the road towards all those other things. Balance is key to the happiness... The piece of paper does not make me successful, I have to feel that I am going to continue to contribute. (Lines 878-904)

Justine notes that achieving a doctorate is a great accomplishment but some people "don't realize that we were just like them, and the road is long and nobody will tell us that it was easy, but it at least allows people at different ages to see that it is an option available to them if they are prepared to do the work" (Lines 730-732).

There is a reason why Chiiman chose this name as her pseudonym. The name Chiiman refers to canoe. This stems from a story she shared with me that best describes her own definition of success:

> I would describe it as, I would just keep trying to get to a place where I can and will be comfortable. But unfortunately to do that, to get there, I'm still navigating in the system where my kind of compass doesn't work. There are ways of doing things. So I guess it's like trying to get into the canoe. And if you don't get into

> the canoe properly you fall into the water. And that may happen a few times but you finally get into it without tipping over, and it is then that you can sit up straight in that canoe. (Lines 342-348)

In a metaphorical sense, the inner drive that allows her to continue her journey despite the many times she fell into the water is perhaps the reason she is able to sit up in that canoe today. It is a search for balance or finally finding that balance.

The vision of the women is really a collective vision and a "collective obligation to help each other." Paula emphasize this point: "to share what we have, to be kind, to model empathy, love, sharing, and compassion. And not to forget the teaching of the natural laws" (Lines 647-649). Justine echoes this perspective: "what we want to see are healthy communities. What I want to be is a healthy person."

Paul stressed the importance of modeling health, wellness, and leadership, "so that our own people would see that we could do it and so would non-native people....We are putting both worlds into one and that is what we are modeling... because if we want wellness in our communities it starts with us. If we want leaders who are healthy – mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically – it is going to start with us" (Lines 575-590)

The women's vision also included honoring the role of Aboriginal men and working together towards a collective vision. Justine believes the men have suffered more in terms of losses over the last 100 years. She said,

> Women's roles in relation to child rearing and care-giving and teaching, within those roles in the community, have to a larger degree stayed the same...But what about the men? Their role has been lost to a larger degree in terms of being the hunters, protectors, having roles in communications with other nations. I think they have been disrupted to a far greater degree... The women are taking that leadership role as they always have. In some ways it is going back to the matrilineal societies that we had originally before contact. The men used to be right beside us in those roles. We used to have complementary roles. Now we are starting to see our men but it is not in the same numbers... (Lines 823-842)

Justine talked about how important it is for women to serve as models not only for other women but also for the men. She said,

> ...it is not just for other Aboriginal women we [serve as role models], I think it is important that men see the Aboriginal women because everyone will learn from each other. We all need to look to ourselves. I take that responsibility seriously,

> how we interact with members of the opposite sex. If we want respect and if we want to move as partners in the community, then again we have to model. (Lines 657-663)

All four of the women believe that it is the women who are at the forefront of the journey towards healing, wellness, and education. They did not want to exclude the men, who were encouraged and invited to be part of the circle.

> I invite our men to be part of this healing too. I believe that as women we have this obligation to help our men to reconnect to their roles because women traditionally have always been in the decision making circle. Our men were the leaders in the tribe but they never made the decisions without the women. They always went to the women. They would go and talk to them and then they would go and represent us collectively. Now, when you look at our society today, our men are out of context. They're not sure what their role is. Those of our men who are working in political positions for example...They have become the oppressors and they don't know it. They don't know the role they now have of being in the hierarchy, of being up here and us being down here, lower than them, that it is not our way. That is not the way we are supposed to be...(Lines 358-373)

The women want to educate both men and women.

Justine's purpose is to work with Aboriginal people and interact on the front lines. She has taken on a responsibility that she is honoured to own:

> When I was asked to be a helper, from a teacher of mine in a sweat lodge, to be one of her four helpers, she talked about, and my mother talks about, women of integrity. That is a big responsibility for me to be honored with that responsibility; I always have to remind myself of that. That is who I am and who I want to continue to be and what I want to share with other people. (Lines 663-667)

Justine wants to "contribute to the betterment of those things while maintaining who [she is] as an Aboriginal person."

It was mentioned earlier that Iskwew discovered her purpose under the guidance of the elders, and that purpose was to become an elder herself. She wants "to be known in this lifetime as a person who has gone to get the knowledge and wisdom of the elders" and believes she has achieved her purpose when people are able to refer to her as "...a great mom. She empowered her kids. She was a great grandmother who was a teacher. She worked towards understanding her culture, her language, and promoted it and took that responsibility..."(Lines 1060-1066).

The significance of a doctorate to the women is an accomplishment that would help to achieve something greater, namely, a contribution to building people and community. There is deep commitment engendered by the example of past leaders and those women who have helped pave the way. As Paula stated,

> What I feel is the commitment and obligation that I now owe to our community. To give back and help young people to become the best they can be for our communities collectively. It is not about me, it is about collectively helping our communities and what we have to do to help move them forward; help our families, friends, relatives, and our community members. (Lines 132-136)

The inner sense of responsibility to Aboriginal people and community is perhaps the passion that helped the women on their journey towards high academic achievement. In the next chapter, the themes will be discussed within the context of the research literature based on my interpretations.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Qualitative research involves a "spiraling progression" that enables data collection and analysis to occur simultaneously (Berg, 2001). This is in contrast to the traditional linear model of completing one task and moving onto the next task. Berg (2001) describes a clear and simple picture of this process by stating that, "with every two steps forward, you take a step or two backward before proceeding any further" (p. 18). Thus, the process involves collecting the data, analyzing it, and then collecting more data for accuracy, or to fill in any gaps or holes. However, because the findings and the discussions of the findings are separated out into different chapters, it may not seem apparent that I followed Berg's process. I separated this chapter from the findings chapter in order to make a clear distinction between what the women said, and my discussion of what they said in relation to the literature.

In the findings chapter I presented the five themes, with sub-themes, as they evolved applying thematic analysis. The themes do not present a chronological life story of the women's lives. Rather, they represent the major aspects of their life experiences from the perspective of earning a doctorate. I concluded the thematic analysis with a look at the women's vision and purpose, what they saw themselves doing, or are doing, after completion of the doctorate. The stories of the women are complex and never ending.

They are real life stories of four women who shared experiences having a major influence on their journey towards academic achievement. In essence, I uncovered the challenges the women faced on their journey towards a doctorate and on how they overcame these challenges, but even more significantly, the power of the Aboriginal culture. In this chapter, I will discuss the findings in relation to the literature and in the same order as the themes/sub-themes were presented in chapter IV. Themes and sub-themes referred to in the text are italicized.

Effects of Colonization

Since colonization, the history of Aboriginal people has reflected a legacy of oppression and suffering around the world (Maracle, 1996; Miller, 1996; Miller & Chuchryk, 1996). Although Aboriginal people have experienced a legacy of oppression, they have also come from a long line of strong and resilient people. For example, the

women in this study talk about the influence of their predecessors. Other examples of strength and resilience can be found in Anderson (2000) whose focus is on Aboriginal women, and Meili (1991) who compiled profiles of Elders. A more personal example is provided by Monture-Angus (1995) who speaks of her journey as well as that of those who came before her. More examples that exemplify the role of Elders can be found in Archibald and White (1992), Sterling (1992), and Lightning (1992).

That the women had first hand experience of the harmful effects of colonization is very clear from the stories. At particular points in their life, the women came to a realization of the effects of colonization on them and their families even though they may not have clearly understood events at the time they occurred. The sub-theme *The Oppressed Oppressing* revealed that what became all too familiar to these women was their knowledge of the effects of colonization on Aboriginal people and how many Aboriginal people themselves do not understand the effects. Oppression leads to questioning of one's own worth, identity, and sense of belonging. Many people are aware of the history of Aboriginal people but many do not understand the aftermath of colonization even amongst some Aboriginal people themselves. This is particularly true when Aboriginal people are oppressing each other.

It is particularly hurtful when the oppression occurs in families. When husbands and fathers play the role of colonizer, and act ashamed of their "Indian" family, the members of the family are traumatized. When the women confront the men, however, they are able to begin the healing for themselves and their children. Iskwew, for example, came to the realization that as long as she was in an oppressive relationship she would be subject to a "colonial mentality," by continuing to serve her husband and be treated as a lesser human being.

Emily Faries reminds us that, although it is common for men and women to seek careers outside the home, "we must have a balance between white ways and our traditional ways…it is important to ensure that we do not adopt too much of the white world so that we do not lose our own traditions, culture, language" (cited in Castellano & Hill, 1995). By adopting a lifestyle with values and morals that do not fit with Aboriginal culture and tradition, we cause an imbalance within the natural laws that interconnect all

things and all people. It is important to maintain the "values of love, caring, honesty, and sharing" (Iskwew).

In order to counteract the destruction within their culture, their communities, and their families arising from colonization, many Aboriginal people are taking an active role in reaffirming traditional values and morals. Much of this is done through maintenance of the culture and practicing traditions, but it can also be through education, just as the women in this study have gone on to obtain their doctorates while maintaining their identity.

The sub-theme *Early School Experiences* described experiences in residential school and the experiences of being an Aboriginal child growing up during a time Aboriginal people were condemned for being Aboriginal. The challenges of separation from home, feelings of isolation, and wanting to 'fit in' or be 'accepted' at a young age were a constant struggle. Only two of the women in this study attended residential schools, but that does not mean the other two have not been affected by colonization. That is to say, the oppression of Aboriginal people has caused subsequent generations to suffer, including children and grandchildren. Miller (1996) states, "what made the effort to 'civilize' the indigenous people a congenial task for church people was their belief that Indians, though harder to assimilate than some other groups, produce a better product once assimilated" (p. 187). Thus, "the colonizers erase you, not easily, but with shame and brutality" (Maracle, 1996, p. 8). This is why, for two of the women, the pain still lingers and the memory is still lucid.

In order to help victims of residential schooling, the Aboriginal Healing Foundation publishes a newspaper titled *Healing Words* focused directly on the negative effects of residential schooling. Available across Canada, *Healing Words* addresses the work that is needed in Aboriginal communities to heal and to educate. This newspaper targets Aboriginal people who have attended residential schools and those who have not attended including the general public, who want to learn more about them. *Healing Words* also publishes personal stories submitted by residential school survivors. The existence of this newspaper demonstrates the need to educate and create awareness about residential schools and their oppressive effects.

The sub-theme *Racism* demonstrated the horrific experiences in residential schools, but more distinctively of being an oppressed Aboriginal child. Questioning their own identity occurred in their early years of schooling as a result of negative experiences of racism. The women developed low self-esteem and self-doubt. Chiiman started to believe the white girls when they said, "the girls from the reserves were dumb." This self-doubt intensified when she failed that year. Iskwew was referred to as the kid with "Indian germs." And Justine developed low expectations of herself as a result of low expectations from the teachers. These atrocious experiences -- or as Chiiman would describe them, "deadening" experiences -- demoralized and dehumanized them as Aboriginal children.

Miller (1996) discussed racist notions resulting from the residential school experience: "bureaucrats and educators tended to assess Indian ways against the standard of their own society: Indian culture was defective because it was different" (p. 185). This whole notion had a ripple effect on society and what was taught to the general public was taught to their children - a multi-generational impact. As a result, racist notions continue to exist. Iskwew talked about how the nearby town to her community is still racist. One of her children lived in that town and moved away because of the racism. Personal experience of racism from elementary to post-secondary schooling was reported in a study conducted by the First Nations House of Learning at the University of British of Columbia titled "Honoring What They Say: The Postsecondary Experiences of First Nations Graduates." At the post-secondary level, racism was considered a "major barrier" (Archibald et al, 1995, p. 21).

My findings revealed that racism was evident in the lives of these women. It produced pain in their lives and within their families. There is no evidence, however, that racism became a 'major barrier' to their educational success. Racism existed and was a hindrance but the women did not allow it to permeate their lives. Racism became a reason for persevering, rather than an excuse for giving up. Racism persists in their lives, but not to the extent experienced in their younger years.

The harsh realities experienced by the women are consistent with the effects reported in the substantial literature on colonization. I must state that I could have placed more emphasis on the colonial experience in my interviews, but, true to the objective of

my study, I chose to focus on the facilitative experiences in the women's lives, because very few studies have examined Aboriginal women's progress through higher education. The women recalled the negative experiences as formative and influential in their lives, as background to their motivation for academic achievement. This study examines how these women have surmounted the oppression and challenges thrown up by colonization in their pursuit of higher education.

The *Effects of Colonization,* focusing particularly on *The Oppressed Oppressing, Early School Experiences,* and *Racism,* are part of the women's past that they carry into the future. These effects originate in an era of oppression but, more importantly, are tempered by their own powerful and beautiful culture. This became largely noticeable when the women embraced their Aboriginal culture and traditions.

Connecting with Aboriginal Culture and Tradition

The women in this study have stripped away layers of oppression and hurt and embraced their Aboriginal spirit that has guided them and provided strength. It was the traditional culture, and identifying with the culture, that unveiled a spiritual and powerful being. The women in this study, as well as many authors, discuss the importance of returning to the culture to learn about the natural laws, for help in balancing the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual, to begin healing from the effects of colonization, or to learn who they are and their history (Anderson, 2000; Castellano & Hill, 1995; Lane, 1984; Hampton, 1995; and Miller & Chuchryk, 1996).

The sub-theme *Spirituality* described cultural traditions and practices that helped these women make sense of the world. The women encountered traditional experiences that connected them to their Aboriginal being in ways that I find difficult to articulate other than as a powerful spiritual awakening. Seeking the traditions and practices was a result of their efforts to achieve healing in their lives, either from tragedy or wanting to discover more about themselves as an Aboriginal woman. For the women, the experience with the sweat lodge was a ceremony of spiritual cleansing where prayer is carried out for their loved ones and Aboriginal people as a whole. The women shared fundamental personal beliefs. They sought guidance from the belief in the Creator. Justine spoke about her first exposure to the culture when she attended a large gathering of Aboriginal people who celebrated with pipe ceremonies, sunrise ceremonies, and round-dances and

powwows every night. This experience awoke something inside of her that has not left her since.

Anderson (2000) describes this experience as follows: "Uncovering this part is an act of recognition, a physical, spiritual and emotional remembering that can link us back to our ancestors and to a time when Native women were uniformly honoured and respected" (preface).

Lionel Kinunwa describes this act of remembering in this way:

> Our ancestral memories are in your blood, they're in your muscles, they're in your bones, they're in your hair, and those memories are there....many of us do not pay attention to these memories because we are too busy paying attention to what's going on in the modern world. We don't pay attention to our historic memory. That is why when we hear the drum, our spirit is moved. This is because the vibrations of the drum stir old memories – our ancestral memories. (cited in Wilson, 1995, p. 65)

Stan Wilson (1995) explored the idea of "honor[ing] traditional spirituality in an academic institution" through sharing spiritual knowledge (p. 61). Much of his exploration involved telling of his own experiences of ordinary events that we consider extraordinary only because we tend to limit our notions as to what is real and what we are comfortable with. For example, Wilson told a story about a time when he was walking through a field in Saskatchewan. He imagined what that area would have been like 300 years ago. He imagined the buffalo and deer and where camp would be set up. He realized that perhaps his ancestors could have lived and died on the very spot he was standing on, or perhaps on the spot of his very next step. He said,

> If that is the case, I'm walking on sacred ground. If my ancestors died here, their remains would be in the soil. Their remains would have become part of the soil, enriching it in the process. The grass that's growing here would be getting its nourishment from the soil and from their remains, and so my ancestors are in the grass. My ancestors are likewise in the trees, in the worm that lives on the leaf of the tree, in the bird that eats the worm.... (p. 63)

Considering this, Wilson stated that when we go into the woods we are not alone. Whether Aboriginal people believe it or not, we are surrounded by our ancestors. Embracing this and honouring this is what enhances our Aboriginal being and brings understanding to our experiences. This kind of understanding could help Aboriginal

people make sense of the world around them and truly respect what Mother Earth has provided.

Belonging to a Community revealed the importance of belonging to an Aboriginal community or connecting with an Aboriginal community. The women found it essential to their Aboriginal being to be part of a community. Although the women had different experiences of community the experiences are interconnected. For example, Justine was lonesome living in a big city and she knew something was missing. Eventually, she found a small Aboriginal community within the city where she felt welcomed. Chiiman, who also lives in a city, always made a point to visit her home community to maintain her grounding. With assurance in her voice, Iskwew said, "My roots are in [my home community]; that is where I am from." Being part of the Aboriginal community defined where they came from. Their awareness of where they have come from resulted from their efforts to seek the culture and traditions. They knew the name of the community where they were raised but the significance of the concept of community did not hit home until they learned the significance of their culture.

I turn now to a related idea: "the belief is that it is not possible for a 'self' to exist separately from the group or community, but must rather exist in relation to it" (Martin, 2001, p. 25). Smith (1999) argues, "Indigenous communities have made even their most isolated and marginal spaces [as a result of policies enforcing reserves] a home place imbued with spiritual significance and indigenous identity" (p. 126). Community can be defined in multiple ways. As Smith (1999) and Martin (2001) state, a reserve name, a nation, a social group or organization, a pow-wow, are examples of the different ways community can be defined. It is important to maintain personal, social, physical, and spiritual relationships with Aboriginal people in particular contexts. The fundamental values, beliefs, and rules are rooted in the community and these are reflected onward to individual members.

The abiding sense of belonging to a community was a necessary support for the women in persisting with their academic studies. They developed a deep sense of connection to the community and a responsibility to contribute back to the community.

Contributing Back to the Community was an essential factor for the women in achieving their doctorate. They felt a fundamental responsibility to help contribute to

their community and the Aboriginal community as a whole. Achieving their doctorate was one thing but applying it was another. As Iskwew stated, "What we learn we try to bring back." Paula pointed out, "It is my obligation, not only to my own community and our people in our geographic area, but across the land." The women emphasized the importance of sharing their knowledge and sharing their experiences in hope that others would learn. All the women at one point in their lives have taught at the post-secondary level or have been involved with assisting students in the academic process. They have actively participated in their communities and viewed it as their purpose to assist in improving the lives of Aboriginal people and to assist people in recognizing their innate qualities.

The responsibility to the community is interrelated with maintaining the community. The underlying philosophy and understanding is that 'everything' is interrelated and Aboriginal people are shaped by the land, family, and community. The responsibility and obligation felt by the women was a way of fulfilling their relationship with the Aboriginal community. According to Anderson (2000), Aboriginal women "will often say that their motivation for engaging in community development comes from a sense of responsibility to the children and the need to preserve justice" (p. 213). Anderson (2000) believes the women consciously make decisions pertaining to future generations of the community. The women in this study have stressed how important it is to listen, teach, and guide, but not to enforce a decision upon another individual. Although the women in this study are not necessarily aware of each other, they are collectively working together for the well-being of Aboriginal people. Sylvia Maracle and Jeannette Armstrong have argued "that the ultimate goal is to allow everyone in the community to use their natural abilities towards the well-being of the collective" (cited in Anderson, 2000, p. 217). It is as if the women have invested themselves in the development of the people. They have a vested interest in maintaining the community spirit that builds individual spirit.

Looking to our past for guidance into the future is like walking backward into the future (Stan Wilson, personal communication, February 9, 2001). I believe this to be an exceptional insight. Anderson (2000) similarly states, "You have to know where you come from to know where you are going" (p.15). Gertie Beaucage, an Ojibway woman,

articulated the following that helped me understand an example of looking to our past for guidance:

> I don't believe that [the ism's were] thoroughly unknown before the Europeans came here. I have to figure that we had the same capacity for the "isms" in our original societies that we have today. What was available, however, were systems by which to balance that. (cited in Anderson, 2000, p. 57)

Beaucage also mentioned that the key which is needed to unlock the morals and values that were once so prevalent in ancestral society is to bring home balance and extend that out to our communities. To do that our culture must once again honour, value, and respect women.

It was not only the ability of Iskwew, Chiiman, Paula, and Justine to adapt particular aspects of their culture to their academic experience, but also their inner drive and personal persistence which enabled their achievement.

Inner Drive and Personal Persistence

The major theme of inner drive and personal persistence demonstrated the strength of the women to pull through various circumstances they found themselves in during their journey. These women are resilient by nature. They have overcome challenges and persevered. However, the strength within the women was not always evident. This was a quality that evolved over time and a quality the women knew they could draw from, because they had the strength within. I will re-introduce one particular example taken from the theme, *Vision and Purpose*, which also provides insight into *Inner Drive and Personal Persistence*. There is a reason why Chiiman chose this name as her pseudonym. Chiiman means "canoe" in her Indigenous language, and a canoe best describes her personal persistence. The path we are on in life can relate to Chiiman's analogy of a canoe in finding a balance. She said:

> I guess it's like trying to get into that canoe. And if you don't get into that canoe properly you fall into the water. And that may happen a few times, but you finally get into it without tipping over, and it is then that you can sit up straight in that canoe. (Lines 342-348)

In a metaphorical sense, the inner drive that enabled her to continue her journey despite the many times she fell into the water is perhaps the reason she is able to sit up in that canoe today. The persistence of Chiiman, Iskwew, Justine, and Paula is recognized in

three life experiences that evolved into sub-themes -- *Family Influence*, *Formal Education*, and *Employment* -- that demonstrate the inner drive found in these women.

Within the sub-theme, *Family Influence*, the importance of family and the significant mark left by the parents was evident throughout our dialogues. The parents provided a foundation of values that grounded the women. The teachings may not have been understood until later in life but the teachings were nevertheless followed throughout their journey. Two of the women have lost their parents but their spirit remains alive in the women. All four of the women discussed lessons learned from both their parents.

For example, Chiiman believed that if her parents had allowed her to return home from the residential school she would have continued to be dependent on them. Chiiman attributes her passion for her language to the influence of her parents. Both her parents were adamant about maintaining the language. Although accepting their teachings was difficult, she looks back on the lessons taught by her parents and strives to continue educating others about maintaining Indigenous languages. Iskwew learned about independence, cultural values and understanding her role in traditional ceremonies such as the sweat lodge, Indigenous leadership, and the meaning of humility through her parents. Each lesson was not learned instantly and it was through her mistakes and lack of understanding that she was driven to continue learning. Paula learned a strong work ethic. Her parents worked all their lives and this influenced Paula tremendously. Paula stated, "They role modeled hard work," and she applied this to her school work ethic. Justine believes she has gained her strong work ethic from her father and her courage and strength from her mother. It was difficult for her to miss school when she was in her post-secondary studies and now it is difficult for her to miss work.

According to Gunnarsson (1997), the way children are socialized into traditional roles as children could have a direct effect on the future achievement of girls. The way girls and boys have been taught to interact or learn in school and at home may continue into secondary and post-secondary education. The women in this study discussed the effect of negative experiences in their earlier years. They discussed the challenges they still experience but now know they have the strength within to surmount them. The

teachings from their parents have obliterated the negative teachings from the residential schools. The memories linger but inner drive and personal persistence prevail.

Anderson (2000) writes about Aboriginal women and how they have maintained a strong sense of self and how they persevered through all their oppressive experiences. She describes what she calls the "Foundations of Resistance" as facilitating factors that have helped Aboriginal women maintain a strong sense of identity. These "'foundations of resistance,' such as strong families, a sense of community and a close relationship with the land, provide the strength to defy the many oppressive experiences that an Aboriginal woman is likely to encounter" (p. 116). The women had the strong influence of at least one of their parents, which guided them in their search for their culture and traditions, and helped them maintain a strong sense of their Aboriginal self. These lessons learned by the women have been passed on not only to their own children but also to their students and community members.

The experiences in *Formal Education* beginning with residential school to post-secondary experiences, although very trying at times, spawned strong and determined women. I saw great determination in all of the women. I was moved by their ability to persevere and face their challenges. Despite negative experiences in their early school years and into their post-secondary studies, the women did not doubt the importance of education, but they did at times doubt their ability.

There was a burning desire for education and this is a sensation that remains within each of them. Chiiman wanted to take control of her education. Iskwew yearned to attend university. Paula always believed that education was the way to make life better, and Justine admired other Aboriginal students attending university which influenced her to attend university.

Both Justine and Iskwew disclosed feelings of self-doubt about entering university. They had distorted perceptions of what it takes to be a university student. They felt they were not smart enough to attend university and thought they could not measure up. It was not until long after entering their university studies that they started viewing the experience differently. The change in perception stemmed from learning from other Aboriginal students and the support and encouragement of family, friends, and individuals who became their mentors.

The harsh realities of experiences with sexism, racism, and classism made the women more determined. As Justine once stated, "...Part of that proactive optimism and enthusiasm and just that whole fight element are really prevalent here amongst the students." Being around Aboriginal students in the university stimulated her own thinking and motivated her to seek answers at a deeper level.

I have heard the statement, "Education is our Buffalo." The Buffalo provided everything for our ancestors – food, warmth, storage, tools – it was our sustenance. With the eradication of the Buffalo, Aboriginal people had to find another way to sustain themselves, and this is education. As the literature demonstrates, education as a tool for survival stems from our history. The history of education amongst Aboriginal people has been more a traumatic than an academic experience, and more a political than a supportive experience. It has only been over the last few decades that Aboriginal education has gone through some positive changes. However, these changes, according to Hare and Barman (2000), "have only become more complex as Aboriginal people attempt to implement their own vision of education in a contemporary world" (p. 331). Battiste (1995) states, "Every generation of Aboriginal parents has had to reinvent 'education' for its children. Every generation of Aboriginal peoples has had to struggle with the painful contradictions inherent in humankind's earthly situation" (p. vii). Our children are not acquiring the Indigenous knowledge necessary for their cultural survival. It is not enough for Aboriginal people to receive only an academic experience; they must also be educated about their culture and traditions, guided by Elders and Aboriginal educators and scholars.

The final sub-theme, *Employment*, reflects on experiences in the work force that motivated the women to pursue higher education. The women focused on experiences prior to their entering the doctorate program, and on earlier experiences. Through challenging experiences, the women painstakingly learned about the racism, tokenism, adversity, and stereotypes in the workforce. My findings revealed an internal resolve within the women that brought comfort and insight to the situation at hand. These various experiences were viewed as a motivating tool for the women themselves to be part of a change agent for Aboriginal people. The negative experiences were transformed into empowering thoughts.

Chiiman recalled her racist experience with her employer as inspirational. She said, "...He tried to make me feel powerless. I'm sure he did at the time. Those kinds of things inspire me, no matter how hurtful they are." Justine remembers working for a native organization that was run mostly by non-natives. She said, "Back then they used to get away with tokenism. The Native people were the secretaries but they were the managers." Her own Native students stereotyped Paula. She was the principal and would greet the students daily. When new students entered the school, they automatically thought her colleague, a white male, was the principal when in fact he was the vice-principal. Iskwew learned the hard way in terms of imposing a European system, with theories that were all about power and control, upon a Native institution. Her parents helped her to see the destructiveness of this system for Native people. She learned that she was imposing a "philosophy, that mind-set of hierarchy, a bureaucracy with very few on top and with information dictated down without consideration of people you serve." As a result, she went back to school.

Encouragement and supportive surroundings were formed during their work experiences as well. Both Justine and Chiiman were influenced into obtaining their doctorate degree as a result of their experience working in an academic environment. Their work led them to think about their personal long-term goals, as well as the long-term goal for Aboriginal people. All the women have spoken about the importance of their contribution to the Aboriginal community, and one way of providing this service is through employment.

The women progress with a fortitude that stems from their culture, their Aboriginal being. Anderson (2000) believes that when Aboriginal women reclaim the authority and sense of self that was once seized from them, they then have the courage and motivation to nurture the future. Although I did not address employment in my literature review, I now realize that this area was also a facilitating factor in the women's journey towards higher education. My findings are consistent, however, with the literature describing the barriers to educational success. When I reflected on the barriers to educational success, I considered this question: what drives the women to continue their educational endeavors to improve on the lives of Aboriginal people? Inner drive and

personal persistence played a vital role in the development of the women, but the guidance and teachings stemmed from significant people.

Mentorship and Role Models

Mentoring is a widely accepted and effective way of transmitting knowledge, learning, and skill to another individual. A role model is a significant person whom others learn from and strive to emulate. We value the experience and wisdom of those who have gone before us and have created a path for those to come. These individuals are highly respected and valued. It was important to me, and the women, to honor those who have helped and guided them in their journey. Their academic accomplishment and their re-connecting with their Aboriginal selves were a result of the influential people in their lives. This section gives focus to *Teachings from the Elders, Influence of Women, and Support Groups*.

The first sub-theme and one of the most significant within the Aboriginal culture is *Teachings from the Elders*. These significant individuals are considered the vessel of the culture and its teachings. The women received support and guidance from their Elders intermittently throughout their educational journey. As Paula, Chiiman, and Iskwew became young adults, they yearned for the teachings from the Elders and later dedicated themselves to learning about the culture, teachings, roles, responsibilities, and traditions. In addition, Justine was brought into a circle of elders at a conference, and the learning that took place was significant for her because it offered something she was not getting at home when she lived with her parents.

The women feel that it is now part of their responsibility to carry on the vision the Elders have about education, community, and family. This will be further discussed in the final theme. The Elders passed along their understanding about the cosmos and life situations. Iskwew said, "They gave me a strong foundation, a foundation of a belief system of who I was."

The Elders teach much of the tradition through practice and hands on experience, and much is passed on orally. Meili (1991) discovered momentous teachings of Elders and documented their stories that reminded people of the strength of their ancestors, the spiritual beliefs, and the traditions that are essential to Aboriginal people. The Elders Meili (1991) interviewed had a common concern for the young people and how important

it is for the youth to obtain their education. Meili's findings are consistent with the important role the Elders played in the journey towards a doctorate for the women in this study.

I discovered that *Teachings from the Elders* during their educational journey provided insight into the context and contents of the women's master's thesis or doctoral dissertation. What I found most significant was that three of the women identified themselves as working towards becoming respected Elders themselves.

The *Influence of Women* in the lives of Iskwew, Chiiman, Justine, and Paula has been significant; women have contributed to their growth and development. They did not dismiss other significant women in their lives or significant men, but it is important to acknowledge the mothers and grandmothers who contributed valuable lessons, teachings, and guidance.

I found that the mothers and grandmothers were the ultimate teachers in their journey. The mothers and grandmothers demonstrated the utmost strength and vitality. They were the visionary leaders both within their families or communities. They were the women who held on to the Aboriginal belief systems and ensured that they were transmitted to successive generations. They were the women who maintained the home and nurtured the children. The voice of their mothers and grandmothers were heard in a transcendent way by the women throughout their educational journey as whispers of encouragement and motivation to continue.

Anderson (2000) exemplifies the strength and fortitude of Aboriginal women in her book *Recognition of Being: Reconstructing Native Womanhood*. She is amazed at how Aboriginal women "have managed to achieve such a strong sense of self, particularly taking into account all of the oppressive experiences of Aboriginal people" (p. 115). Anderson further states, "Strong, independent female role models provide Native girls with the sense that they can overcome whatever obstacles they will inevitably encounter. These lessons have traditionally been learned in a non-verbal way" (p. 118).

In my study, the stories were consistent with those reported by Anderson (2000). For example, Justine reported that she had "no choice but to follow [her] mother around" and that she "rode the coat tails of [her] mother." But through this experience, Justine

learned by example and acknowledged the courage and strength of her mother. Justine proudly stated, "My journey also parallels [that of] my mother."

Anderson (2000) also acknowledges the influential role of the grandmother in the lives of younger Aboriginal women. Anderson states, "The authority of many Native grandmothers stems from their role as the head of the extended family. In such families, Native girls witness both the social and the economic decision-making power of older women in their communities" (p.120). This is complemented by the works of Ahenakew and Wolfart (1998) in *Our Grandmothers' Lives As Told in Their Own Words*. This book captures the essence of Aboriginal mothers and grandmothers. Their stories "illustrate the prominent role which women have always played in exercising social control but they also tell of the decline in social cohesion which marks the present" (p. 18). (For some ways of changing the decline in social cohesion see the discussion of the final theme, Vision and Purpose, below).

Support Groups consist of groups of people that provided guidance, encouragement, open-mindedness, and support to the women on their journey. If we reflect back on the previous themes, the support of parents, family, Elders, influential women, and community are evident in the lives of all four women. The parents instilled spiritual beliefs and provided enough knowledge for the women to continue on their own as they sought out the culture, traditions, and Elders. The family was pivotal in supporting their decision to attend university and complete their doctorate. The Elders were significant in their development, as were influential women. The support of community was essential to their sense of belonging and contribution.

Supplementing these support systems is the support from groups of men and women through gatherings such as retreats or sessions conducted in the form of talking circles. Talking circles are powerful, sacred, and healing. A talking circle is more than a group of people coming together, forming a circle, and talking. The women could not emphasize enough the significance and power of the circle. As Paula stated, "I am not surprised by what happens in the circle because of the power of the circle." Paula experienced and witnessed the power of healing when she and a group of women decided to form healing circles within their community. Groups of men, women, and Elders were invited into the circle and shared personal stories. Talking circles are meaningful for

Justine. Much of her healing was through talking circles with groups of women. Justine said, "...Talking circles are so close to my heart, and that is why I believe in them for what they offer to everyone who sits in them. They are healing and miracles happen in talking circles." Chiiman and Iskwew also believe in the power of circles and the sacredness entailed in the process. All the women believe that the circles are so much more than healing. The circle engenders compassion, love, friendship, humility, and unity.

In order to provide a clear understanding of the significance of the talking circle, some understanding of the symbolic form of the circle and its significance to the culture must first be understood. The circle is well described in *Black Elk: Being the Life Story of a Holy Man of the Oglala Sioux*:

> You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. In the old days when we were a strong and happy people, all our power came to us from the sacred hoop of the nation, and so long as the hoop was unbroken, the people flourished....Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle. The sky is round, and I have heard that the earth is round like a ball, and so are all the stars. The wind, in its greatest power, whirls. Birds make their nests in circles, for theirs is the same religion as ours. The sun comes forth and goes down again in a circle. The moon does the same, and both are round. Even the seasons form a great circle in their changing, and always come back again to where they were. The life of a man is a circle from childhood to childhood, and so it is in everything where power moves. Our teepees were round like the nests of birds, and these were always set in a circle, the nation's hoop, a nest of many nests, where the Great Spirit meant for us to hatch our children. (Black Elk, 1979, pp.195-196)

A different perspective on the circle, yet similar, is provided by Engel (2000) who states that, "All circles are built around the following six elements" which are: intention, sacredness, commitment, equality, heart consciousness, and gratitude (p. 7). Sinclair (1993) identifies the following principles as essential to the circle process. These principles are respect, equality, confidentiality, truth, and listening (cited in Martin, 2001, p. 53). Engel (2000) further states that, "Circling seems to come more naturally to women, perhaps because we are more accustomed to functioning without a hierarchy," and women tend to be more open-minded and understanding (p. 8). This is not to

underestimate men's contribution within the circle, but in relation to my study, it was the women who initiated the talking circles for both men's and women's groups.

Talking circles are used for community healing, support, "restorative justice efforts," and "restoration of well-being," also referred to as personal healing (Martin, 2001). One primary creation of the circle is equality: "we are all equal and…we are all parts of the whole. In a circle each person's face can be seen, each person's voice can be heard and valued. All points on a circle are equidistant from its center. In fact, it is the circle's definition and function to distribute energy equally" (Engel, 2000, p. 8). The circle brings together men and women, diverse groups, young and old, and in addition to support offers the opportunity to communicate diverse opinions openly and to show respect for what is shared within the circle.

This leads to my final theme *Vision and Purpose*. The entirety of the women's experiences is part of the circle of life and the circle continues into this next section.

Vision and Purpose

This is our challenge; to rediscover
this innate knowing of circle and to fit that
knowing into the realities of
the modern world.

(Christina Baldwin as cited in Engel, 2000, p. 127)

This theme reveals an intuitive knowing that has been a guiding force throughout the women's academic journey towards achieving a doctorate. The women came to honor and nurture the wisdom and teachings that lie within their circle. The circle encompasses embracing the past, connecting with the culture, tradition, community, and honoring Elders, family, friends, children, men and women and inviting the future. The circle revolves around and embraces the women who in turn honor and embrace their self. The circle stimulates movement towards social change and unity. The women understand their achievement as a collective accomplishment in the sense that it began with the influence of people who helped them on their journey. The circle that embraced the women made a difference although it was still up to them to work through their rigorous academic studies.

When I first set out on my journey of exploring this topic, I was referring to my participants as successful women who had accomplished a doctorate. I soon realized I was imposing a non-aboriginal perspective on their accomplishment. Success tends to be associated more with wealth, status, and power. It was obvious that these women were successful in terms of achieving a doctorate but they did not describe themselves as successful. Chiiman believes that we as Aboriginal people are judged in terms of success by the non-Aboriginal community. In the Aboriginal culture, life is about a process, a journey, that one engages in for the benefit of him or herself and his or her community, rather than striving for personal recognition and status. Chiiman stated, "The word 'success' has been given to my people and it is not our concept, and we are judged by that word." Success for Iskwew is being at peace and challenging herself to the ultimate. Paula views success as getting to understand and know herself as an Aboriginal woman. Similarly, Justine believes success is happiness when you are balanced in life: mentally, physically, spiritually, and emotionally. This frame of thinking and thought process is described by Hampton (1995): "What is essential to recognize is that there are culturally characteristic ways of thought and communication that are of value and interest in themselves and worthy of consideration" (p. 25). All the women believe that achieving a doctorate is a form of success, but the greatest success is applying themselves to their community and larger Aboriginal community. Achieving a doctorate was not an individual accomplishment but an accomplishment for the people and the contribution that would be made. The women do not elevate themselves above any other being. They continue to maintain the circle and work towards helping others as they have been guided in their journey.

The collective vision advocated by the women is working together to achieve healthy, vibrant, and strong communities of people. Emphasis is placed on the self in relation to other beings, this is not an isolated individualistic self. This begins with the self: to model health and wellness, leadership, love, compassion, honor, and respect, not only in relation to self and other people, but towards Mother Earth. In addition, their vision also included honoring the role of Aboriginal men and working together towards a collective vision. Men and women are needed to maintain and keep the circle of life strong. The women call on their tradition and call on those men who have stepped out of

their rightful place in the circle and invite them to re-enter. Overcoming many of the problems in our present society – social injustice, crime, suicide, racism, the list goes on – requires us to work communally. Anderson (2000) sums this up by stating:

> Native women acknowledge the suffering of Native men, interpreting those who engage in dysfunctional behaviour as products of colonization. Many Native women have been able to continue their traditional responsibilities of creation and nurturing, but many men's responsibilities have been greatly obscured by the colonial process. It is more difficult for men than it is for women to define their responsibilities in the contemporary setting and reclaim their dignity and sense of purpose. (p. 239)

Justine stated, "I take that responsibility seriously, how we interact with members of the opposite sex. If we want respect and if we want to move as partners in the community, then again we have to model. " Anderson (2000) believes we need to honor the sacredness of men just as women want the sacredness of their role as women maintained. The circle of life is dependent on this male-female balance.

The women in my study are on the path towards fulfilling their purpose. The intuitive knowing that has been a guiding force in their journey has been working towards contributing significantly to the Aboriginal communities and wanting to be part of that circle of change. There is a feeling of responsibility in all of this, but it is considered an honor to uphold. Iskwew added to this by stating that her ultimate purpose, which was learned under the guidance of the Elders, is being receptive to becoming an Elder and pass on to successive generations her lessons and teachings. She does not reject this responsibility.

Anderson (2000) articulates the sense of purpose of women extremely well. She says, "when we conceptualize our connection to the sacredness of all creation we can begin to see that, as individuals, each one of us has a purpose or a reason for being. Our purpose is something that we bring with us from the spirit world....Our purpose is almost always tied into what we do for the community" (p. 201-202). Diane Hill adds:

> The answers related to who we are, how we are connected to life, and why our spirits have entered this life are already inside us. So we just have to be taught how to open ourselves and to look inside for the purpose of remembering. We just need to remember who we are...for many of us, remembering is difficult because our true selves are covered over by the memories and feelings associated with the painful experiences in our lives. The spiritual task before us requires us to work

> our way back through all of those experiences to uncover our true selves by remembering who we are and what our gifts are. (cited in Anderson, 2000, p. 202)

My research focus was on the life experiences that influence the journey of Aboriginal women towards academic achievement. The purpose of this research was to discover the challenges that high achieving Aboriginal women had to face and how they overcame these challenges. In doing so, I discovered stories that were extremely profound and inspirational. Although challenges were prevalent in the journey of these women, it was a journey towards self-discovery through embracing culture. Said in another way, these women built their education on a cultural foundation, and it was necessary for them to build this foundation before they could proceed.

These women had questioned their own Aboriginal identity but it was through those experiences that they became determined to connect with their culture and tradition and thus achieved a strong sense of identity. The process of their journey was more important than the end-result because all of the women have stated that their journey continues after achieving their doctorate. It is how they apply themselves afterwards that becomes key.

CHAPTER VI: SUMMARY, RECOMMENDATIONS, FINAL REFLECTIONS

Summary

I began this study with an interest in the journeys taken by Aboriginal women who have achieved, or are near completion, of an earned doctorate. The search for an appropriate methodology to pursue this interest has taken me on my own journey in exploring Indigenous research methodologies in combination with qualitative western methodology. My study is based on the life experiences of Aboriginal women shared through stories that were guided by semi-structured interview questions analyzed according to Berg (2001). I sought to gain a greater understanding of the facilitative factors that contribute to the outstanding academic achievement of these women.

My research study included four outstanding women who came from diverse cultural, geographic, family and community backgrounds. My criteria for selection were as follows: 1) Women with an earned or nearly completed doctorate degree; 2) Women who are working with or on behalf of Aboriginal people; 3) Women who identify themselves as Aboriginal, whether that be Status, Non-status, Treaty, or Metis; and 4) Women who have been brought up within the Aboriginal culture and identify with their culture.

As I reflect back on my research question: What are the life experiences that influence the journey of Aboriginal women who have achieved academic success? I realize there is no single answer as to what it takes to achieve academic success. Furthermore, I am simply providing my perspective on experiences shared through stories from four Aboriginal women. According to the Aboriginal worldview, every part of life/Mother Earth is interconnected as with the circle of life experiences that have taken the women up to this point in their lives. It really is an accumulation of many experiences which I will summarize, based on the story of my research, to answer the research question and the related sub-questions:

1) In what ways do the personal history and family/community relationships influence the achievement of Aboriginal women?
2) In what ways are the academic achievements of Aboriginal women influenced by personal qualities?

3) What are the challenges that hinder Aboriginal women from academic achievement?
4) How is success defined by the Aboriginal women?

Rather than responding to each sub-question separately I have chosen to express my understanding of the sub-questions in relation to characteristics that are within the framework of an Indigenous research methodology. This will be primarily done in a story mode based on the story of my research. Specific reference to the themes will be addressed later on in the discussion of thematic results within the framework of Maracle's questions.

I cannot answer each sub-question separately because each of the questions are interrelated and all contribute towards answering the research question that has influenced me on this journey. Separating out the questions would simply fragment the process. I am reminded by the Medicine Wheel in respect to the teachings of balancing the mental, spiritual, emotional, and physical natures of our being. In order for a person to be healthy and well nourished all of these aspects need to be equally balanced and developed and therefore cannot occur without having an impact on the others. I believe this to be true in respect to the four sub-questions.

The Story of my Research

I will begin with a discussion of the importance of stories. The story being told by the story teller not only maintains the practice of oral traditions but creatively connects the past, present, and future. Smith (1999) gave me a better insight and a greater understanding of the importance of stories. She said, "For many indigenous writers stories are ways of passing down the beliefs and values of a culture in the hope that the new generations will treasure them and pass the story down further. The story and the story teller both serve to connect the past with the future, one generation with the other, the land with the people and the people with the story" (p. 145). Stories become a tool to orally transmit knowledge and help us understand our own experiences expressed in our own words.

The power of the stories expressed by the women in this study provided invaluable knowledge to me about four Aboriginal women on their journey towards a

doctorate. The stories unfold life experiences that reveal the growth of a spiritual being. What I found was more than an academic journey. It is a journey towards self-discovery built on the foundation of the women's Aboriginal culture, their Aboriginal being. I found their stories of experiences to be traumatic, profound, and inspirational. I found the women's stories to be a compilation of experiences in overcoming challenges, looking to their culture and tradition, and searching for an understanding of the knowledge and the feeling of the spirit within the culture as means of healing and growing. Martin (2001) tells us, "the true gift that University offers goes beyond textbooks, lectures and class assignments: it is about exploring the self and reclaiming or reinforcing who we are – especially our Aboriginal identity" (p. 169). The elegance of the women's thought process and power of knowing themselves as Aboriginal women contributes to our understanding of the Aboriginal worldview and Aboriginal women's progress through higher education.

My findings show that the personal history, family and community relationships do in fact influence the achievement of Aboriginal women. This is seen throughout the various themes. Stories about their personal history stemmed from colonial practices. However, the emphasis was placed on the power and strength of the culture and those predecessors that became influential in the women's journey. This produced qualities of inner resolve and their ability and strength to continue on their path. Family and community were essential in the growth process. The challenges faced by the women are recognized throughout their life experiences. However, their personal qualities helped them continue their journey and work towards overcoming various challenges. These personal qualities stem from their upbringing, their culture and tradition, their belief system, and an inner drive of personal persistence. Akan (1992) confirms this by stating,

> Perseverance is emphasized as a desirable character trait for success or survival. Perseverance has the same implications as continuity in life; it is continuous, the continuousness of thought, action, and living. The Earth, universe, life, is going on all the time. Culture here is a dynamic process as it is an ongoing mutual cultural trade between beings, individuals, and groups. (p. 192)

The women agreed to share their stories because they wanted to pass on their stories as a means of transmitting knowledge to me as well as contributing to Aboriginal people. The vision of the women is to bring home the balance – mentally, spiritually,

emotionally, and physically – and the values and way of life that are imbedded in that balance. This extends out to the community. It is NOT about personal success but rather about a collective vision working towards helping each other and respecting our place on Mother Earth. It is about personal responsibility to family, community, culture and tradition, to share and educate, to take part in the healing and voice our stories, and to contribute to maintaining Aboriginal ways of doing things.

A Comparision with Maracle's Questions

In the course of my writing I came across questions raised by Sylvia Maracle (1995) that I believe to be valuable in collecting data that are inclusive of a more traditional Aboriginal path than what I had initially proposed. I thought a comparison with her questions would provide a means of synthesizing my findings from a fresh perspective.

As I use Maracle's questions as the organizational structure for this section, I will systematically discuss the themes in the order they were presented in earlier chapters. In so doing, I will also answer my research question: What are the life experiences that influence the journey of Aboriginal women who have achieved academic success?

When I read the following statement by Sylvia Maracle, who presides as the executive director of the Ontario Federation of Indian Friendship Centres, it had a powerful influence upon me, for it demonstrated the significance of a life journey, and echoed my findings of the importance of a traditional Aboriginal path. Sylvia Maracle states:

> In trying to walk the traditional path there are four lifelong questions we ask ourselves: Who am I? In order to answer that I have to know: Where have I come from? And once I know where I have come from, I have to know: Where am I going? And once I know where I am going, I need to know: What is my responsibility? We ask ourselves these questions and every time we think we know the answer to one, it changes all the others. (cited in Castellano & Hill, 1995, p. 246)

The four women in this study have journeyed through the traditional path as described by Maracle, although I did not ask these particular questions of the women. All the questions are interrelated with each other and cannot exist without the others. However, for the purposes of this study I have separated out the questions to discuss and

to demonstrate the traditional path journeyed by the women in their academic experience. Maracle's question, "Who am I?" will be left to the end, after the remaining questions have been discussed. This rationale is not only drawn from Maracle but from the women in this study whose journey defines their identity. Only the women themselves can answer the Who am I? question. I can only speculate that they derived the answer based on their experiences, but ultimately the women would need to be asked this question directly in order to validate my speculation.

Where Have I Come From?

In answering the question, "Where have I come from?" we must look at the history of Aboriginal people. I will only discuss this question with respect to the following themes: *Effects of Colonization* and *Connecting with Aboriginal Culture and Tradition*. The history of Aboriginal people determines and defines the contexts in which the women find themselves.

Reflecting back on the *Effects of Colonization* provides a past that endures into the future. As the literature states, the effects of colonization encompass much more than what is stated in this study (See Acoose, 1995; Battiste, 1998; Hare & Bareman, 2000; Maracle, 1996). The sub theme *The Oppressed Oppressing* dealt with the process of Aboriginal people oppressing each other as a result of the effects of colonization. It becomes particularly disturbing when the oppression occurs within families, and has an effect on the sacred circle of the family. The sub-themes *Early School Experiences* and *Racism* provide a glimpse through the eyes of the women victimized and colonized during the residential school era and their childhood years as Aboriginal children. The early educational experiences left a legacy of formidable experiences, not only for the women but for all Aboriginal people. These experiences were not clearly understood at the time of the occurrence. Nevertheless, the experiences produced knowledge, inner strength, and an understanding for the women today. The women are able to reflect back on the history of Aboriginal people and their own personal experiences, and in the process work towards strengthening the circle of life.

The women recognize and honor the legacy of their strong and resilient culture and people. *Connecting with Aboriginal Culture and Tradition* exemplified the power, resilience, and spirit the women had within and around them. It was the culture and

tradition that moved the human spirit and guided them to seek internal/external forces to help them on this journey. The sub-theme *Spirituality* provided insight into the power of following traditional ceremonies, such as the sweat lodge, sweetgrass, sunrise ceremonies, round-dances, or pow-wows. The belief in the Creator guided the women onto their present path. Each time the women connected with their spirituality, it livened and rejuvenated their spirit. *Belonging to a Community* was important to the women because it enabled the women to define where they came from. Furthermore, the sense of belonging was essential to their personal, professional, and spiritual growth. This belonging has its responsibility, as reflected in *Contributing Back to the Community*. This responsibility is taken seriously and acknowledged in honor of those who have paved the way, those on the journey, and those to come. Honouring one's responsibility maintains the sacred circle of the community through sharing, teaching, and guiding.

In essence, the women acknowledge they come from a legacy of colonization; however, the prevalent feature which is key to their achievements is the realization that, they come from a strong legacy of culture and tradition that has continuously prevailed. Knowing this provides a clear path for the women on where they are going in their journey.

Where Am I Going?

In response to this question I will summarize the following two themes: *Inner Drive and Personal Persistence* and *Mentorship and Role Models*.

Inner Drive and Personal Persistence addresses the personal qualities that kept the women on the journey towards their doctorate. The sub-theme *Family Influence* delineated a foundation of valuable lessons, values, and teachings that sustained the women on their path. The teaching of the parents had a major influence on the women's path towards academic achievement. The sub-theme *Formal Education* revealed the women's abiding belief that education was the way to make life better. They knew where they wanted to go in life, and that was to pursue an education. *Employment* provided the experiences to think about their long-term goals. It also provided the realization of the vast amount of work needed in Aboriginal communities to improve social and economic conditions. In order to ameliorate these conditions, pursuing higher education was essential.

Mentorship and Role Models dealt with a means of transferring knowledge, thus guiding the women in their pursuit of higher education as well as towards acknowledging their commitment to Aboriginal people. In *Teachings from the Elders* the women spoke about the considerable wisdom and knowledge held by the Elders. The spiritual convictions and prophetic visions of the Elders capture the heart of those who listen. As the women listen and learn from the Elders, they intuitively know they are being groomed to pass on the knowledge being shared. The sub-theme *Influence of Women* set the standard of strength and resilience, defined reality, and articulated a knowledge base that influenced the life journeys of the women in this study. Infused with strong beliefs and a resistance to negative structures, the women's values and persistence stem from the root teachings of their mothers and grandmothers. The theme *Support Groups* dealt with providing space for sharing and healing, and a time to honor the circle of friends, family, and community members. Support is essential during the turning points in life and the support is essential in working towards achieving goals. Support groups in the form of talking circles emit energy, spirit, and healing. These produce power in a mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional sense.

In summary, the women come from families and backgrounds which have grounded the women on their academic path. The women developed not only from their personal and professional experiences but also from those who inspired them. Their journey continues. In their work with Aboriginal people, they are life long students and teachers who have become the mentors and teachers of the younger generation.

What is my Responsibility?

The final theme *Vision and Purpose* will be addressed here. The women's life journey thus far has taken them, retrospectively speaking, to a place in their life where they have a clear *Vision and Purpose*. Monture-Angus (1995) sums up the essence of life experiences in this way,

> wisdom comes from what we do with our life experiences. Wisdom is about how we make our life experiences work for us, after we have worked to understand what the experiences mean. True wisdom requires much self-reflection. It is in this way that First Nations recognize and credential people. (p. 77)

The women in my study have gained a wealth of knowledge and experiences through much self-reflection.

The responsibility of the women can be viewed through their vision and purpose in life. Their vision is a collective vision in the sense of working towards contributing to the Aboriginal community and not exclusively for themselves, which is inclusive of their role and responsibility. Their role is to model the health, wellness, leadership, respect, and honor, they want to teach other people. They must be accountable to themselves as they are towards other people. Their responsibility is to the Creator, Mother Earth, themselves, children, family, Elders, community members, and to building their community. Their role and responsibility is taken very seriously and they hope to teach successive generations based on their own experiences. The vision and purpose entailed honouring our being as Aboriginal people and understanding our role and responsibilities, and remembering the teachings of the natural laws.

Who Am I?

In order to answer "Who am I?" we must consider the past, "Where have I come from?" we must consider the present and the future that is interrelated with, "Where am I going?" and "What is my responsibility?" All of the questions are closely entwined and relate to the development of the self. These stories of experiences come full circle and define the women's identity. The responsibility to life, family, community, and Aboriginal people is parallel to the responsibility to the self. This is not an individualistic self but a self in relation to other beings or all living things. There is a saying that in order to help others you must first help yourself. I cannot take responsibility for another life or a situation unless I take responsibility for my own life and model that behavior. The women know who they are and recognize their journey is continuous and evolving, but are now armed with a stronger spirit that stems from their Aboriginal being in which they honour and embrace.

Recommendations for Future Research

The following are recommendations for future research that have grown out of this study. Future research may result in more insight into Aboriginal women's progress.

1. Similar research be conducted with Aboriginal men.

It would be interesting in conducting a study on Aboriginal men working towards a doctorate. Would their journey entail similar or different experiences from the women in this study? If the experiences are dissimilar, what makes the experiences different? In such a study, I would explore what we need to do to help both genders succeed in their academic achievement?

2. Further inquiry utilizing talking circles of both Aboriginal men and women based on their experiences in attaining high academic achievement.

This inquiry would include talking circles of men and women that would not only initiate understanding of the gender differences, but might also serve to be highly informative and educational. A design of this nature could make a valuable contribution towards fostering the healing relationship between men and women – in terms of understanding, respecting, and honouring their being – as well as towards healing community and initiating community empowerment.

3. A cross-cultural comparative analysis between Canadian Aboriginal women and Immigrant women.

A study of this type would look at analyzing and comparing thematic findings of life experiences of women from different cultural backgrounds to see if in fact culture and tradition are pivotal in the journey towards a doctorate. Are the life journeys of Immigrant women similar to that of Aboriginal women?

4. A more in-depth study on the life experiences of Aboriginal women towards academic achievement.

A study of this type would look more in-depth at facilitating factors that contribute towards the academic achievement of Aboriginal women. An idea would be to expand the present study by gathering data in all parts of Canada.

5. Further research needs to be conducted on the importance of mentors and role models.

Who are the mentors and role models for other Aboriginal women, men, and youth? Are we as Aboriginal people lacking in promoting mentorship and role models? If so, how can we work towards improving this? A more in-depth look at how this is being done according to the Aboriginal worldview warrants further study.

6. Another study would need to be conducted to see if younger Aboriginal women have a different set of beliefs and values, and if they define success differently.

At the onset of this study, under the sub-heading Personal Assumptions, I stated that I believe the younger generation has been influenced much more by Eurocentric beliefs and values than the older generation. If would be interesting to explore the different sets of belief systems held by different generations, if any. A study of this type would help us look at the generational impact and the effects of colonization on younger people and how they view their journey thus far. Their stories would tell us about their progress and what they need in their life to help us assist them in their academic journey.

My Learning

This study has planted the seed of knowledge and understanding that has enriched my thought processes. I have come to a greater understanding of my culture, and learning from the women has encouraged me to seek the teachings of my Elders. I do not claim to fully understand Indigenous methodologies or western methodologies, but I believe that combining Indigenous and western methodologies has suited the purpose of this study and helped me to gain a better understanding of each.

As I reflect on my thought processes, I realize how my thinking has broadened and matured as I progressed. Several things stand out for me:

First, this process has brought understanding to my own journey towards academic achievement. I am honoured to have been guided to the women in this study and to learn from them. I believe each of these women has modeled honesty, respect, and kindness, and has now become a teacher and role model in my life. The women are an inspiration to me in my journey. They have shared their stories with me, many of which are not written here because they fall outside the boundaries set by the purpose of the study, but their stories will always remain close to my heart, long after the tapes and transcripts have been removed.

Second, this journey has taught me to honour my own being and honour my own journey. However, throughout this process, I was concerned if I was or not honouring the ways of Aboriginal people in a respectful way, particularly honouring and respecting my

home community. I was afraid that I would not apply an appropriate methodology within an Aboriginal framework. I have come to realize that what I have presented in this thesis represents my learning and understanding of my experiences to this point. Some might disagree or criticize my ideas, yet I ask you, my Aboriginal brothers and sisters, my Elders, my parents, that my imperfections and flaws be viewed with patience. I have much to learn.

Third, I began with a focus primarily on Aboriginal women. After a couple of interviews, I realized the women spoke also in relation to Aboriginal men. Honouring both genders is essential in working towards strengthening the circle of life. Medicine (1995) reminds us,

> All gender roles were valued in traditional societies. Men and women were concerned with the quality of life for our peoples. Issues that confront our people today should be the concern of all genders. Issues such as domestic violence, substance abuse, homophobia, and gender disparity should be researched with a preventative agenda. On the other hand, strengths of survival as unique nations need investigation. It will require both men and women to do this. (p. 43)

Lastly, I wanted to find out what Aboriginal women were doing to successfully obtain a doctorate. I wanted to focus on what was working in the lives of these Aboriginal women. Although there is no definite set structure, the journey towards academic achievement is a journey towards better things, such as: helping other Aboriginal women who are on the academic journey, like myself; contributing towards the community - not for personal gain - either their home community or the larger Aboriginal community; setting the path for future generations; and establishing themselves as role models and mentors for Aboriginal men and women, particularly young women. This journey only becomes more clear and more meaningful through embracing the culture and identifying with it. Acknowledging an Aboriginal identity and connecting with an Aboriginal community is essential.

Final Comments

I believe it is our own personal responsibility and decision in "overcoming the colonial mindset that so many of us have internalized" (Duran & Duran, 1995, cited in Hingley, 2000, p. 101). I am not suggesting that we forget about the past. It really is a

personal choice to either move on and work on the passion within, or continue living the life of the oppressed or becoming the oppressor. Paulo Freire (1970) suggests that we "reflect within ourselves and then take action on our individual realities. This ideological change involves a radical transformation. The ways in which we perceive the world, relate to the world and to one another, will be altered forever" (cited in Hingley, 2000, p. 101). The women in this study have altered their perceptions of their challenging experiences, such as, overcoming the adversity of their early school experiences. This may not have been clearly understood at a young age, but it was how they perceived this experience later in life and how it was applied that mattered. Another example is the inner resolve of overcoming shyness, shame, divorce, and experience with loss and how the women chose to heal through those hardships and became more determined to continue their education.

I will end with these final comments: Aboriginal women embracing Aboriginal identity has meant connecting with what has been rightfully ours. Although colonization has shunned Aboriginal culture and traditions, there is a resurgence of Aboriginal being. This is through following the natural laws, attending ceremonies or following traditions that move our spirit, being connected to family, Elders, community, and most especially, Mother Earth. I strongly believe that sharing stories as a strategy is how we learn and teach. I hope this brings a new perspective on, and new insight into, the lives of Aboriginal women in their journey towards a doctorate.

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